The dreams that you FEAR will come true.
Disney
CHILLS
BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU WISH FUR
VERA STRANGE

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Disney CHILLS

BE CAREFUL what you WISH FUR

by

Vera Strange

Disney PRESS
Los Angeles · New York

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Based on the book THE HUNDRED AND ONE DALMATIANS by Dodie Smith. Published by Viking Press.

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For information address Disney Press, 1200 Grand Central Avenue, Glendale, California 91201.

ISBN 978-1-368-06542-9

For more Disney Press fun, visit www.disneybooks.com

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The dreams that you
FEAR will come true.

1 #SELFIE

Click.

Delia studied the selfie on her phone, displayed in the PicPerfect app. Her face stared back at her from the screen—familiar, yet almost like a stranger. Hazel eyes, freckled cheeks, wavy brown hair, heart-shaped lips. Her eyes were the one thing that she liked about her appearance. Emerald flecked with cinnamon and even a little gold. It was a rare eye color, and she'd gotten it from both her parents. Mom had the emerald-green eyes, while her father had cinnamon brown—or so she'd been told. She'd never actually met him, nor did her mother keep pictures of him around.

Still, Delia frowned at her picture. She could spot every flaw in her skin, especially the monster pimple threatening to explode on the tip of her nose. Why did it always choose that spot? She approached the standing mirror, crammed into the corner of her little attic bedroom of their Chicago

brownstone, and peered at her skin up close. She picked at the zit, but that just made it worse. Red and angry and swollen.

"Why today of all days?" she muttered. "Why not yesterday, or even tomorrow?" It was like the zit *knew* that it was her first day at her new middle school.

It was an evil zombie zit. It had a life of its own.

A rush of anxiety crashed through her. There was no way to hide this thing. And she needed to look perfect for her first day. Her mother had always drummed that idea into her head.

You only get one chance to make a first impression.

Almost as if reading her thoughts, a prompt pinged from her phone.

Ready to post to PicPerfect?
Don't let your ranking slide!

Delia's heart stopped—*No, I'm not ready!*

Couldn't the app detect the zombie zit on her nose?

Apparently not. But the app so needed to add that feature. She quickly hit DISMISS, even though she did need to keep posting fresh content to her profile to keep her ranking high. At her old school, she and her two best friends in the world, Aaliyah and Zoe, had the highest rankings in their class. That also meant they were the most popular kids.

Pretty much every kid her age had the PicPerfect app and monitored it closely, the way adults watched the weather or the stock market, tracking the slightest shifts and changes. If you didn't keep posting selfies and getting comments, then your ranking would plummet.

But there was a catch.

You couldn't post just any old pic.

Posting bad selfies was *worse* than not posting at all. The goal was to collect the pink heart emojis, and avoid the dreaded red devil faces. Users clicked one if they liked your selfie and the other if they didn't. The more hearts, the more views you got, and the more popular your account became.

That was the goal. Grow your followers. The more hearts, the better.

But one devil could make your account ranking plummet.

And fast.

Delia didn't want to post a bad selfie and lose her high ranking. Plus, there was even more pressure today. From experience, she knew that the

first thing the kids at her new school would do after they met her was search out her PicPerfect profile and check out her ranking and feed. At the top of it would be her selfie from that morning. First impressions mattered.

That meant it had to be even more perfect than usual.

Zombie zits were not allowed.

Delia studied the selfie, still displayed on her phone screen, waiting for her to post it. It just didn't look…perfect.

Delia tried dabbing on a little pale cream concealer, but the zit was still visible like a volcano about to erupt and spew gunk. She swiped on some mascara and pale lip gloss, the only makeup her mother allowed. Mom had lots of strict rules, which annoyed Delia, but she found ways around them. Mrs. Smith, their landlady, let her do chores around the house for a modest payment, which Delia used to buy forbidden makeup, like pink blush and eye shadow, at the drug store.

Delia stashed the contraband in a makeup bag and tucked it into her backpack to apply later at school, where her mom wouldn't bust her. That was her normal routine, and usually Zoe and Aaliyah were there to help. But today, she'd be on her own, and it was especially important that she look her best. She needed every bit of help she could get, even if it came from a lipstick tube or blush palette.

Her eyes flicked back to her face in the selfie. She frowned and hit RETAKE.

The camera screen loaded up again in PicPerfect. The "PP" icon stared back at her, daring her to try again. She changed her shirt, slipping into a purple top. She aimed the phone at her face but then grimaced.

Ugh, why did I ever think I look good in purple?

Delia tossed the purple shirt aside, where it landed in a heap on the floor, and swapped it for an off-the-shoulder, loosely woven turquoise sweater. She peered back into the camera, angling it high and down at her face. Still, she wasn't satisfied. While the sweater had looked great in the store, the turquoise now seemed to make her skin look pallid and greenish.

She switched to a black turtleneck, hoping a neutral color would help. But it just made the zit on her nose more visible. Worse yet, with every wardrobe change, her hair was getting more disheveled and frizzier.

Finally Delia gave up on trying new tops and instead tried changing the angle of the selfie, posing by the window in natural light, despite the chilly winter day outside, then casually leaning on her bed with its colorful

bedspread, which she'd had since childhood, then full-on model-glamming it up in front of her mirror.

Click. Click. Click.

She snapped away.

But each picture…wasn't *PicPerfect* perfect.

She sighed. No matter what she tried, something always seemed to be… wrong. Suddenly she missed her friends like a stab to her heart. They'd always take selfies together—on the way to school, or in the bathroom between classes, or after class let out in the afternoons, when they'd gather at one of their houses to work on their homework. Aaliyah and Zoe would have been able to help her troubleshoot her morning selfie woes, fixing what was wrong. They'd know if it was the wrong top, or makeup, or simply the pose or angle of the shot. They always did everything together.

But that was over now.

Her friends were still attending her old public school, and Delia would be starting at Gilded Crest Academy, the fancy private school uptown. All alone.

Missing her friends terribly, she flopped down on her bed and scrolled over to their profiles, feeling worse with each selfie that she flipped through. Their pics were so perfect. Pink hearts clustered under each image. Not a devil face in sight. But that wasn't what made her feel bad. Of course she wanted her friends to get all the hearts and have tons of loyal followers.

What made her feel bad was the post from that morning.

Her eyes studied the pic at the top of their profiles. Aaliyah and Zoe posed together on the "El" train. The caption read, *First day of second semester!* with a cluster of trendy hashtags trailing after it. Her friends looked so happy…even though Delia wasn't there.

They didn't look sad, or like they missed her at all.

In the past, it would have been the three of them riding the train to school together, snaking through the tops of the city's redbrick buildings with the *clackety-clack* of the tracks beneath them. The more Delia studied the pic of her friends, the more it felt like she had been photoshopped out of it—almost like she had been erased from their lives.

Worse yet, they looked like they were having so much fun without her. Their faces grinned into the camera—Aaliyah with her dark skin and tightly curled black hair cropped short like a runway model, and Zoe with her blond bangs and shoulder-length bob, cut perfectly straight, almost like an

antique porcelain doll. They both wore puffy coats and stylish, vintage-inspired clothes.

"You don't even miss me," Delia whispered to the selfie, feeling sorry for herself.

For the thousandth time, she wished that her mother wasn't making her switch schools, especially in the middle of the school year. Her stomach twisted.

But then—

Ring. Ring. Ring.

A vid-chat call was coming in on the app.

Delia's heart leapt with joy, recognizing the caller. She hit ANSWER.

"We miss you!"

Aaliyah's voice echoed out of her phone. Her face lit up, and she squealed into the phone when she saw Delia. Then another voice cut her off — "Hey, stop hogging her! Gimme some screen time…."

That was Zoe.

And it was so very…*Zoe.*

She pushed Aaliyah out of the shot in a playful way, flashing a big grin and waving manically at the screen. Zoe was super high-energy and played almost every sport imaginable—softball, swimming, tennis, volleyball, even Ping-Pong.

Delia smiled at the memory of them piled on pillows on the floor of Zoe's basement to watch the summer Olympics, a once-in-every-four-years event. Her favorite event was the high dive. She loved how graceful the divers looked arcing through the air before plunging into the deep end.

Meanwhile, Aaliyah's favorite sport was virtual. And it wasn't played at the Olympics…yet. She was a big gamer, loving RPGs the most. *Battlestar Asteroid* was her specialty. She even had followers online and streamed her game play live for them to watch. She was sort of a legend, if you were into that sort of thing. Delia wasn't into games. But she loved how different she and her friends were, and how despite those differences, they could still be the very best of friends.

"We saw you lurking on our profile," Aaliyah said with a mock-accusing look. "And posting hearts to all our selfies."

"So we decided to call you," Zoe chimed in. "And have, like, a convo __"

"IRL," Aaliyah finished.

Delia laughed. Zoe and Aaliyah had been friends for so long, they could basically finish each other's thoughts. The two of them had met in day care, though technically, neither of them could remember that, while Delia met them her first day of second grade, when her mom had moved them from Philadelphia to Chicago. Sometimes the closeness of Aaliyah and Zoe's bond brought out Delia's insecurities, but her friends had a way of making her feel like she belonged with them, no matter what was happening.

Just like today.

"So are you super excited for your first day at your posh new school?" Zoe asked.

Both their faces crammed into the shot. They peered at her eagerly.

"I don't know. You have no idea how much I miss you."

"We miss you, too!" Aaliyah said. "But something else is wrong."

"Yeah. Spill it," Zoe added. "I know that tone in your voice."

"No secrets, remember?" Aaliyah added with an arched eyebrow. "We're best friends *forever*. Going to different schools doesn't change that. Forever means forever."

"Okay, okay," Delia said, feeling her nerves flare up. "I guess…I'm nervous about the new school. It's different than Shady Grove. It's a private school with all these traditions and new people and—"

"And they're lucky to have you!" Zoe said. "You're the best! And you're the smartest person I know. You're the only reason I passed math last year. They're gonna love you."

Aaliyah nodded. "Yeah, you'll have zero problems making new friends."

"But how do you know?" Delia said, her insecurity so deep, it felt like the undertow in a big wave threatening to suck her under. "What if they already have their friend groups and no one wants to, like, sit with me or talk to me or whatever?"

"You made friends with us, and we were already a 'friend group,'" Aaliyah said pointedly, exchanging a look with Zoe.

"And we're awesome," Zoe agreed. "Just look at our PicPerfect ranking!"

Delia's eyes flashed to the number in the corner of the vid-chat screen. It was true. They had the highest rankings in their school. That made Delia feel better. Her friends knew her better than anyone. Their faith in her ability to make new friends boosted her confidence.

She felt her nerves about her first day and her FOMO about not being with her besties ebb a bit. Their selfie on PicPerfect was just one picture. And deep down, despite their perfect appearances and worry-free smiles, her friends really did miss her. She had to remember that pictures didn't always tell the whole story. In fact, sometimes they even lied.

"Thanks. You're the best," Delia started, feeling gratitude thrumming in her chest. "I really mean it. I don't know what I'd do without you—"

"Oh, sorry," Aaliyah cut her off. "Gotta go. We're at our stop."

"Yeah, one more tardy," Zoe said with a panicked expression, "and I swear, my folks are gonna disown me. And make me quit Ping-Pong. They said it's stretching me too thin."

"And no more *Battlestar Asteroid* for me," Aaliyah said. "Screen-time grounding is, like, worse than regular grounding. I'm happy to stay home, just don't take away my Wi-Fi."

"Bye, Delia! Good luck!" they chorused.

With that, the screen went dead, dissolving back into the PicPerfect home screen. Delia wished they had more time to chat—or better yet, that they still attended the same school so they could spend the whole day together.

Virtual friendship is better than nothing, she told herself.

Delia posed one last time and raised her phone to try again. *Click.* She snapped the selfie, forcing a brave smile. And this time, for some magical reason, when she checked the photo on her screen she actually liked the picture. While the zombie zit was still there, it looked less monstrous somehow. Her frizzy hair also looked less…*frizzy*.

It was the magic of friendship, she decided. It had boosted her confidence.

She wrote a quick caption. *To the two best friends in the whole world…I miss you!* Then she tagged Aaliyah's and Zoe's accounts. Perfect.

At that moment, an impatient voice reverberated through the town house, making her jump and hit POST before she could properly hashtag it.

"Delia, you're gonna be late for school!"

2 LITTLE DEVILS

"Don't make me come up there and get you!"

Her mother's voice reached her bedroom clear as day, somehow echoing up all those winding stairs to the attic without losing an ounce of strength.

Delia and her mom lived in a town house in the Old Town neighborhood of Chicago, which they shared with their elderly landlady, Mrs. Smith. It had been in Mrs. Smith's family for generations, and its age showed in the worn wooden floorboards, rickety windows that stuck when you tried to open them, and creaky bathroom fixtures that went *drip, drip, drip*.

In all truth, it could use some serious updates. But it stayed warm in the winter and cool in the blistering Midwest summers, and Delia and her mom were lucky to have a nice place to live in a safe neighborhood. Delia had her own room there, even if it was in the attic. In their last apartment, which was technically public housing, they'd had only one bedroom to share.

Delia's father had taken off when she was just a baby, and her mother almost never talked about him. Delia didn't know a lot about him or why he left, just that he wasn't ready for a kid. She wished her mom would say more, but recognized it was a source of pain. It represented a visible way that she'd failed her daughter, or so her mother thought, even if it wasn't true.

If it was anyone's fault, it was Delia's for showing up in this world. That was why her father left, wasn't it? But she knew better than to voice that opinion out loud.

Often, Delia found herself at a loss for words when her friends talked about their fathers, even if they were complaining. She *wished* she had a dad to complain about.

Despite her mother's busy schedule with work and night school, and her strict rules like her makeup ban, Delia respected how hard her mom worked to give them a better life. They'd been able to move in with Mrs. Smith when her mom landed her new job working at a law firm.

"It's your first day, remember?" her mom called up the stairs now. "You know what I always say: First impressions matter…."

Delia mouthed along to that last part because she'd heard it so many times. Two of her mother's other favorite sayings were *Always make the best of a bad situation* and *Never look down, only up.*

It was true, though, Delia supposed. First impressions did matter, especially on first days at new schools. Especially one called Gilded Crest Academy. Even the name sounded super fancy.

Delia had just turned thirteen and was entering the second half of seventh grade. With high school just a year and a half away, everything seemed to matter more. She had to do well at this new school to get placed in honors classes in high school, and she needed to ace those honors classes to get into a good college, and college was her ticket to a better life. Her mother had drummed that into her head since Delia was a little kid.

That was why her mother had pulled major strings through Mr. Jefferson, her boss at the law firm, to help get Delia accepted at the elite private school. Her mom had also spent what felt like countless weekend hours filling out scholarship applications, for which Delia had been required to write multiple essays, to help pay the steep tuition bill. Even with all that work, from what Delia could gather, the school was still costing her mom a good chunk of her income. Delia was grateful for the opportunity, and for

how hard her mom had worked to make it happen, but that didn't change the fact that she was going to miss her friends and her old school. It felt like being pulled in two directions at once—between her old life, the one that she knew and felt comfortable in, and a new life that was exciting and full of opportunity, but also unknown and scary.

Delia glanced back at her phone, grimacing at her improperly tagged post. But there was nothing she could do about it now. Hearts were already racking up in the comments, boosted by Aaliyah's and Zoe's likes. *They're gonna love you.* Zoe's words echoed through her head again, followed by Aaliyah's voice right after. *Yeah, you'll have zero problems making new friends.*

Her friends meant well, but they didn't know what her new school was going to be like. Even Delia herself didn't know. What if the kids there didn't like her? And even if she made new friends, Zoe and Aaliyah weren't replaceable. She didn't want *new* best friends. She wanted her old friends.

With a pang of sadness, she flipped back to their profiles, her gaze lingering on their morning selfie again. Delia was about to turn off her phone and finish getting ready for school, when an ad popped up for a pair of fur-lined boots. According to the ad, they were the top-trending fashion item on PicPerfect. Selfies flashed across the screen of fashionable teen influencers wearing them. Curiosity tugged at Delia, and she clicked on the ad.

House of De Vil Faux-Fur-Lined Boots

The Must-Have Winter Fashion Item!

The boots were black and white with zebra stripes running across them. Tufts of soft black-and-white faux fur poked out of the tops. They were simply gorgeous—the most beautiful boots Delia had ever seen. They'd be perfect for snapping winter selfies for PicPerfect, not to mention, they could help her fit in at her new school. Delia was sure that girls at a place called Gilded Crest would be on the cutting edge of fashion. She flipped through the images, each more tantalizing than the last, and her pulse began to race. She wanted those boots. No, scratch that.

She *needed* them.

But then she saw the price tag, and her heart sank. The boots were $250.

Way too expensive.

Delia glanced at the window. Frost blossomed on the panes, and outside a few snowflakes drifted down. Winter was in full force and would continue mercilessly until spring suddenly appeared out of nowhere, far later than it did in the rest of the country. Chicago tended to do that—snap from one season to the next without warning. But winter was the longest one by far.

With a deep sigh, Delia pulled her beat-up snow boots out of her closet. They were ratty and fraying around the edges, made of cheap plastic material that was flimsy and didn't hold up long.

Even worse, they made her feet sweat. Like, soak-through-her-socks sweat. She was constantly worried that they'd start smelling and somebody would notice, which would be a fate almost worse than death in middle school.

"Delia, I'm counting to ten," her mom yelled once more, her voice snapping Delia to attention. "This is your final warning. Get your butt down here! *One, two, three*…"

Her mother was taking night classes at a law school, so she wasn't a lawyer yet, but she sure sounded scary like one sometimes.

"Coming!" Delia yelled back, sliding on the old boots and cringing at the smell.

But she didn't have time to do anything about it, not with her mom's last warning. Quickly, she shut her phone and bounded downstairs for breakfast, her feet in their smelly boots thumping on the old steps and making them creak.

Flap. Flap. Flap.

She glanced down at her ratty old boots. The sole on the left boot was worn thin and starting to peel off, making that flapping noise, while the right one wasn't faring much better. This was the last thing she needed for her first day at Gilded Crest.

She so wished she had those House of De Vil boots. Envy gripped her heart and squeezed—envy for every girl she'd seen wearing them in her feed. She'd never wanted something so much in all her life. And her old boots definitely needed to be replaced. Maybe, just maybe, she could beg her way into a pair of new boots.

She rehearsed the line of argument in her head as she tromped down the remaining two flights of stairs. She'd have to make a compelling case.

Delia knew from thirteen years of experience that her mother wouldn't be easily persuaded.

But her mom did always say that first impressions mattered. And what better way to make a good first impression at her new private school than with a trendy pair of boots?

She was going to do it. She was going to ask her mother for the boots. Her mom had to understand that this was practically a matter of life or death. Well, social life or death.

But what was the difference?

It was worth a shot, right?

* * *

Yap, yap, yap!

When Delia entered the kitchen, she was greeted by the sound of dogs whining and barking. The room smelled of dog and hot cocoa, a wonderful combination, in Delia's opinion.

For the first time all morning, she smiled for real.

"How're the little devils?" she asked, rushing over to the playpen in the corner of the kitchen, which was layered with torn newspaper, old blankets, ratty towels, and chew toys. Wriggling around in the middle of the mess were fifteen plump Dalmatian puppies.

"It's a bit much, I must confess," Mrs. Smith said. She looked up from her cup of tea. The cup was chipped, but it was fine bone china. Like many things in her house, including her, it spoke to quality that had diminished over time from the grind of aging. She wore a pink cashmere sweater that was pilling and worn in places, paired with a wide skirt. Her skin was weathered, papery thin even, but her brown eyes shone young and bright.

Her town house was decorated with framed pictures of her posing with different dogs that she'd rescued and fostered over the years. Goofy golden retrievers; regal poodles with their fancy haircuts and poufy heads; wrinkly pugs that resembled old men, or maybe aliens; hyperactive Scottish terriers with wild eyes and stumpy legs. The dogs were all different breeds and ages, but the common denominator was Mrs. Smith.

"But the rescue needed a foster mom to take them in," Mrs. Smith went on, her gaze falling affectionately on the puppies squirming around. "I

simply couldn’t refuse.”

Mrs. Smith had a habit of taking in unwanted things, including Delia and her mother. But they were lucky she had a soft spot for helping those in need. Her mother had answered a housing ad online for a landlady taking in new tenants, thinking nothing would ever come of it, but Mrs. Smith had called them back the next day and now Delia couldn’t imagine their lives without her—or her puppy-filled home.

“Fifteen puppies,” her mother sighed over her coffee mug, which wasn’t fine or china and sported a baseball logo. “Can you believe it?”

Delia’s mother wore a simple navy pantsuit, impeccably clean and pressed—her usual uniform for work at the law firm. Her mother always looked put together and spent a lot of time and effort maintaining her black hair in a sleek, stylish bob and nails in a pale French manicure. She may not have been rolling in money, but no one would ever know it. Unlike Mrs. Smith, who sported wild, unkempt graying hair and short, stubby nails chewed to the quick.

“They’re little angels,” Mrs. Smith said, gazing at the dogs lovingly, clearly blind to their poor puppy manners and desire to chew up or pee on everything.

“I feel bad for their mother. Having one was hard enough,” her mother added, shooting Delia a wry smile.

Delia giggled, reaching into the pen to scoop up a puppy. She snagged Radar, the runt of the litter and her favorite pup. Their eyes had only started to open last week, and their black spots were just starting to come in, too.

“I’m not that bad,” Delia said with a mock pout. She petted Radar’s soft fur, peering into his crystal-blue eyes. He let out his distinctive bark—higher pitched because of his small size, yet strong and defiant. “At least I’ve never gnawed on any of your shoes.”

“Yes, but you are a teenager,” her mother shot back without missing a beat. “That’s almost worse.”

Delia rolled her eyes. “I’m barely a teenager. I just turned thirteen.”

“It counts,” her mother said. “Trust me, it definitely counts.”

Mrs. Smith nodded. “Kids grow up so much faster now. What with all that social media and phones.”

Delia glanced at Mrs. Smith’s old rotary telephone affixed to the wall, next to the ancient, pale-yellow stove that still worked surprisingly well for its age.

“How else do you expect me to keep in touch with my friends?” Delia said with a little edge creeping into her voice. More often than not, adults just didn’t seem to understand how the world worked these days. “Especially since you’re sending me to a brand-new school in the middle of the year.”

“Delia, we’ve been over this already,” her mother said in a stern voice. “This new school is your ticket to—”

“A good college,” Delia finished her mother’s sentence. “I know.”

“Then act like it,” Mom said. “Not everyone gets these opportunities. You know I didn’t. I’m doing this for you.”

Delia felt the sting of those words, followed by a surge of guilt. She knew how hard her mom had worked to get her into Gilded Crest. The problem was her mother never asked her if she actually wanted to go. What if she liked her old school? She’d been at the top of her class there, after all. And what if she wanted to stay with her friends and go to the local high school?

Wasn’t thirteen old enough for her to make her own decisions?

But she knew that arguing with her mother was a bad idea. There was a reason her mom was doing so well in law school—she *lived* to win arguments. It was pointless to disagree.

Delia could only lose. And not just the argument—but her phone privileges, too. Her bestie Aaliyah was right. Screen-time grounding was worse than regular grounding.

Delia stared down at Radar, but he gnawed on her hand with his sharp puppy teeth, making her wince. She plopped him back down in the pen. He squirmed over to chew on his sister’s ear, rolling onto his back. He might be a handful—but he was an adorable one.

“Time to change the newspaper,” Mrs. Smith said in a cheery voice, inspecting the pen. She turned to Delia. “Wanna help out? I can toss in a little extra since there are fifteen of them.”

Delia scrunched up her nose. But while changing gross, pee-soaked newspaper wasn’t exactly her favorite pastime, this was how Delia afforded to buy contraband makeup. She suspected Mrs. Smith *knew* that was what she did with the extra cash, but the landlady never busted Delia to her mother. Right now, she was saving up for the glitter nail polish that was the big trend on PicPerfect.

“Ugh, you spoil her,” Mom groused from over her nearly empty cup of coffee. “You shouldn’t have to pay her to help around the house. Delia should do it for free.”

Delia’s mouth dropped open in horror.

Clean up pee for free? Was her mom crazy?

But before she could argue—and risk getting in trouble again—Mrs. Smith signaled for her to zip her lips. Then she turned to Delia’s mother.

“Oh, come on, Megan. A few extra bucks won’t hurt,” Mrs. Smith said in a voice as sugary-sweet as her hot cocoa. “Plus, doesn’t doing chores for money build character and teach kids their hard work will be rewarded?”

Even her mom couldn’t argue with that. Her mother might be a future lawyer, but Mrs. Smith had a special way of getting what she wanted. They were a funny pair, almost like the good cop/bad cop in Delia’s life. But they balanced each other out. She needed both of them.

“Fine, you two win. But let’s be quick. We don’t want to be late.”

With that settled, Delia busied herself with caring for the puppies. While Mrs. Smith took the dogs outside to the small, grassy backyard, Delia stripped out the soiled paper and replaced it with freshly torn pages. Sometimes Mrs. Smith complained about the puppies being so much work, but Delia understood why she loved being their caretaker so much. There was something rewarding about taking care of tiny, vulnerable souls who needed your help.

This wasn’t the first litter that Mrs. Smith had fostered—even if it was certainly the biggest—and it wouldn’t be the last. Since Delia and her mom had lived there, many puppies had come, grown bigger, and then gotten adopted and left their home, and Mrs. Smith cried big, sloppy tears every time. They were tears of sadness, but also of joy that they’d found their forever homes. She wondered if she would cry those tears when Delia went away to college, but that was still years away. It seemed like a lifetime.

After she finished her chores, Delia helped herself to some eggs from the cast-iron skillet on the stove, taking a seat at the breakfast table. She spooned them into her mouth, trying to muster up the courage to ask the question that had been plaguing her all morning.

Well, all morning since she saw that ad on PicPerfect and all those selfies.

“Uh, Mom…” she ventured between chewing. “You know, it’s getting colder. Soon, there’ll be a big snowstorm. I kind of need some new boots.”

Delia pointed to her ratty old ones with the loose sole. She pried it away for extra drama. Mom looked over. She clenched her teeth—*tension*. Her mother was stressed. Never a good sign.

"You're right. That does not look good." Mom sighed. "I'm a terrible mother. I've just been so busy, I haven't even thought about new snow boots."

"That's okay!" Delia said brightly. "I already found the perfect ones. Wanna see? I was hoping maybe we could order them before they run out of my size."

She unlocked her phone and flipped to the House of De Vil shopping page, pulling up the trending faux-fur boots. Her mom looked over, her eyes lighting up when she saw them.

"Oh, those are very cute," she started. "They look warm, too."

Delia felt a surge of hope. Maybe she had been worried for nothing. But then her mother balked when her eyes hit the bottom of the page and landed on the price.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars?" her mother said in shock. "I've never owned a pair of shoes that cost that much."

"Yes, but these are so trendy!" Delia said, pointing to the pics. "It's what all the kids are wearing now. Also, look how nice they are. I bet they'll last forever. Unlike these boots," she added, flapping the loose sole again for good measure.

"Honey, you know even if I wanted to buy them for you, we can't afford those," Mom said, casting her gaze down. "Especially with the tuition costs for your new school."

The school I don't even want to go to, Delia thought. She felt a stab of irritation. She'd much rather have the boots and go back to her old school.

"But, Mom, look…everyone else has them," she said in a pleading voice, flipping to the trending selfies of girls wearing the boots. They flashed across the screen. Each picture made Delia feel even more like she *needed* the boots.

"We're not everyone," her mother said. "You know that. Plus, it's a waste of money. I can find a perfectly good pair at Replay Vintage. You won't know the difference."

Replay Vintage was the local thrift store. Nothing trendy or fashionable was ever going to come from that store. And everything was "gently used" and smelled like moth balls—or worse.

Why didn’t her mother understand that it wasn’t the same thing?

“Ugh, just this once I’d like to get something new!” Delia said, hating how bratty she sounded but unable to help it.

Her mother frowned. “Teenagers,” she muttered under her breath. “Lord give me the strength to survive this.”

Delia felt her anger escalating. It burned hot and fiery in her chest. It made her want to yell and scream, even though she knew she was acting like a spoiled brat.

“You never ask me what I want!” Delia cried. “Or what school I want to go to! You just decide for me. Well, I *want* those boots.”

“You’re being shortsighted,” her mother shot back. “Trust me, this school is your ticket to a better life. And one day, you won’t care what kind of boots you wore. You’ll thank me later.”

Angry tears pricked Delia’s eyes. Her chest felt like it was constricting. She hated her life—and right then, in that heated moment, she hated her mother. She was *never* not going to care what boots she wore. Appearances mattered, especially when you were starting a new school. Kids her age did notice these things. It was why they were trending on PicPerfect.

She knew her mother was trying, but why didn’t she understand?

Her mother saw her tears. “Look, I know it’s a lot changing schools like this,” she said in a softer voice. “I should have considered that. It’s just so hard to get these scholarship slots.”

“I miss my friends,” Delia said, her voice thick with tears. And there it was—the thing that was really bothering her. She looked down at her ratty boots, feeling hot tears drip down her cheeks. “It won’t be the same without Aaliyah and Zoe.”

Her mother followed her gaze.

“Look, no promises,” Mom said. “But I’ll see what I can do.”

3 NEW SCHOOL BLUES

"Delia Ward, welcome to Gilded Crest Academy," Headmaster Dudley said, folding her hands in front of her. She sat behind an ornate mahogany desk—or Delia thought *perhaps* it was mahogany, not that she knew what that was exactly. Just that it was something rich-people furniture was made of.

In fact, everything in the office, and in the entire school, looked upscale. Even the way the headmaster pronounced Delia's name made it sound more special, rolling off her tongue with just the right emphasis and enunciation.

The carpet in the office was a plush burgundy shade with gold crests bordering the edges that matched the school's colors. Framed college and graduate degrees from elite schools hung on the wall behind her, along with paintings that looked like they'd been borrowed from a museum. Not posters—actual paintings.

At her last school, Principal Riggins had a battered metal desk that had seen more years than he had, which was saying a lot judging by his head of

white hair and his grizzled face. And the only things hanging on his walls were wilted, curling posters of 1970s basketball teams. Nothing about that place had been fancy.

"Uh, thanks, Headmaster Dudley," Delia said, fidgeting with the peeled-back sole of her shoe. Even the word *headmaster* felt clunky and unnatural on her tongue. "I'm happy to be here…at Golden…I mean *Gilded* Crest…um…school…."

She trailed off, stumbling over her words and feeling out of place. Mom shot her a look and mouthed, *Sit up straight.*

Oh, right. Proper posture was another thing her mother cared about. Delia thought she was sitting up straight, but she lengthened her spine until it ached, trying to appear taller. Thank goodness she was starting classes during a shortened week. Because of the way the new year had fallen, the school's first day back was a Wednesday. She only had to live through three days of straight posture before the weekend.

"Yes, like my daughter said," Mom jumped in to cover for her, "we're thrilled to have her enrolled here for the remainder of her school year…at Gilded Crest *Academy.*"

Right, not school…academy, Delia thought, feeling like a doofus. She'd only been staring at the glossy school catalog for a month.

"And beyond, let's hope," Headmaster Dudley said, smiling warmly. But then she turned sterner. "Let me be clear, however, that Gilded Crest has different standards from your last school—"

"Like what?" Delia blurted before she could stop herself.

"Well, it's important for our students to uphold the Gilded Crest name, both inside and outside the classroom." With that, she slid a thick book across the desk toward Delia.

Delia felt a ripple of anxiety. Her eyes flashed over the title printed on the cover—*Gilded Crest Academy Student Code of Conduct*. It was both boldfaced and italicized.

Code of conduct? The Gilded Crest name?

What did all of that mean?

"As you can see, we enforce a strict code of conduct for student behavior," Headmaster Dudley said, nodding at the thick book. "I expect that it was different at your last school. I assume they take a more relaxed approach to decorum, shall we say."

Her eyes tracked up and down Delia's clothes. Suddenly her "gently worn" jeans, pretty-but-inexpensive blue blouse, and ratty boots didn't seem up to Gilded Crest standards. Delia shrank back.

But her mother didn't seem to notice. She sat up straighter and smiled.

"Of course, we understand," Delia's mom said quickly. "Delia is a model student and very capable. Her public school had such big classes, it was easy for her to get lost, even with her incredible grades."

"I assure you that won't happen at Gilded Crest," Headmaster Dudley said. "We maintain optimal teacher-to-student ratios to meet every learner's complex needs. Your daughter will get the specialized attention she craves at our academy."

"Good. That's what I like to hear," Mom said with a curt nod. "I know this is the path to the best colleges and universities in the country."

"Indeed, let's hope she measures up. Mr. Jefferson's family has been attending this school for generations and he's one of our biggest donors. His recommendation holds a lot of weight, and it's why we decided to take a chance with Delia. Don't let us down, young lady."

Her eyes bored into Delia. So did her mom's. They both were waiting for her to speak. Suddenly her mouth felt dry and her tongue thick.

"I won't, Headmaster Dudley," she managed to get out. She tried to make her voice sound steady and brave, but inside she was shriveling up. She had never felt smaller or less up to a challenge.

And she'd never missed her old school more.

* * *

"Delia, have a great first day," Delia's mother said as they stood in the reception office after their meeting with the headmaster. She looked Delia in the eyes. "Make me proud. I know you can do this."

She hugged Delia fiercely, then left her clutching her class schedule and the thick student handbook.

"Hey, Mom, wait," Delia started, not ready for her to leave yet. "Don't you want to see the classrooms?"

She half wished her mother would walk her to class like she had in elementary school, even though Delia knew she was too old for that. But her mom had her phone to her ear and was already halfway out the door.

“Sorry, Mr. Jefferson,” Delia heard her mother say. “The meeting with Headmaster Dudley went longer than I expected….”

In that moment, Delia felt a surge of guilt for not appreciating everything her mother did for her. The fight they had that morning came back to her in a rush, making her stomach churn. Her mother worked so hard for every little thing that they had—even this school. Maybe Delia still didn’t want to be here, but she knew her mother was doing it for her. Well, for both of them.

They were a team of two.

Delia and Mom.

That’s how it had always been. Delia had never known any differently.

Well, they were a team of two that sometimes included other substitute players who tended to pass in and out of their lives, much like the litter of foster puppies. Her father was the most notable member who had disappeared, while Mrs. Smith was the newest addition to their team, but Delia hoped that she would become a permanent member of their roster.

They might be a small team, but they were strong and resilient, more than capable of winning.

Besides, her mother was right. Delia had found it hard to concentrate at her last school. The classes were too big, often thirty-five kids in a class. And there were behavior issues that sucked up her teachers’ valuable time. Maybe this new school was what she needed after all, even if it meant that she couldn’t have those trendy boots or afford fashionable new clothes or other nice things like the highest-ranked accounts on PicPerfect.

Buoyed by that thought, Delia glanced at her schedule, then headed for the door. Mom was right.

She could do this.

As soon as she stepped into the hall, Delia heard the stampede of feet. Students marched in orderly packs, bound for class before the bell. These halls didn’t have the kinetic, chaotic rush of her last school. Gilded Crest had a much smaller student population and was therefore less crowded. Students didn’t have to push and shove to get to class, which made it feel more civilized.

Or they’re all just following this code of conduct, Delia thought, clutching the thick student handbook closer to her chest.

These students walked like they had it all under control. Like they belonged here. Like they’d one day be the ones to rule the world. And most

likely they would. But that wasn't what caught Delia's attention.

Her eyes tracked over the students and landed on their feet.

Clomp. Clomp. Clomp.

Practically every girl in the hall was wearing them—the House of De Vil Faux-Fur-Lined Boots. The ones that had been trending on PicPerfect that morning. The ones that cost $250.

The boots looked even more stunning in real life, with their signature black-and-white faux-fur lining. Not only were almost all the girls wearing *the boots*, but they all looked so fashionable. Even the boys looked like they'd just stepped out of magazine ads.

If I looked like them, Delia thought, *I'd have a higher ranking on PicPerfect for sure.*

They probably had no trouble taking effortless selfies, unlike Delia. She bet none of these kids had ever agonized for hours before posting something. She glanced down at her ratty old boots, and her stomach clenched.

I don't belong here.

Ducking her head, she bolted for her locker, wrestling to punch in her new combination while juggling her nerves and the student handbook. She finally got the locker open. A mirror was affixed to the inside of the door.

Nervously, she checked her appearance. She felt like she'd looked good when she posted her selfie this morning, but now her hair looked frizzier than ever. Her clothes looked dumpy and old. That pimple had bloomed into a full-blown whitehead right on the tip of her nose.

She tried to smooth her hair and tuck in her shirt, but it didn't help. At least at her old school, not everyone looked like a PicPerfect model. Here, she stuck out like a sore thumb. Worse yet, because the school was so much smaller, it was harder to hide. Delia felt exposed.

Her eyes tracked over and landed on a group of three girls across the hall, standing by their lockers. They were all wearing the House of De Vil boots. But beyond that, they looked like the kind of girls that Delia would want to be friends with. Fashionable and hip and smart. She needed to make friends at her new school. For a moment, she felt unworthy with her ratty boots and frizzy hair, but then she remembered what her friends had said that morning.

They're gonna love you.

Yeah, you'll have zero problems making new friends.

At her last school, she and Zoe and Aaliyah had tons of friends and tons of pink hearts on their profiles. There was no reason why Delia couldn't make friends here. She took a deep breath, then walked up to the girls across the hall, focusing on the one at the center—a tall redheaded girl with long, wavy hair.

"Hey, it's my first day here," Delia said. "So I thought I'd say hello. Uh, so like…*hello.*" Instantly she hated how clunky the words sounded, but she smiled through it.

The redhead gave Delia a hard up-and-down stare, then she and her two friends burst into giggles. Delia's cheeks burned, but she tried to forge ahead anyway.

"My name is Delia. I'm in seventh."

"Right, I'm Harper," the redhead replied. "That's Charlotte and Ella." She pointed to her friends. Charlotte was Asian with long black hair, while Ella was dark-skinned with curly hair that looked effortlessly hip. They all wore expensive clothes paired with the trendy boots.

Finally Delia felt like she was getting somewhere. "Nice to meet you," she said. "By the way, I just *love* your boots. I'm planning to get some—"

"As if," Harper cut her off. "Pretty sure they're out of your budget."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Delia stammered.

"Yeah, aren't you that new scholarship kid?" Charlotte chimed in, twirling her long, shiny dark hair around her finger. Her eyes bored into Delia, staring down at her ratty boots.

"That's right. We heard you were transferring from the public school," Ella added with a snort. "What makes you think you can be friends with us?"

They all stared at her. As if they really expected her to answer that question.

Mortified, Delia retreated across the hall and shut her locker. She could still hear them snickering behind her and their catty whispers. Harper's voice cut through the hall noise.

"Did you see her *boots*?" Harper hissed to Charlotte and Ella. "I wouldn't be caught dead in those. And like she could ever get a pair of House of De Vil boots. Yeah, right."

Keeping her head down, Delia bolted to class. She could hear the *clomp, clomp, clomp* of her ratty boots with each humiliating footstep. She ducked into the classroom and made a beeline for the back, sliding into an empty

desk. After her encounter with Harper and her friends in the hall, she just prayed that nobody would notice her. Gilded Crest was nothing like her old school.

And these girls weren't like her friends.

The teacher approached the board and scrawled *Picture Day on Monday!*

Ugh, more pictures. Ones that would be printed in an actual yearbook. At Gilded Crest, no less. That was the last thing Delia needed to worry about right now.

A boy took a seat at the desk next to hers. Delia risked a sideways glance at him. He looked different from the other kids she'd seen in the hall. For starters, half his hair was dyed purple, with long bangs cut just above his very blue eyes, and he wore a black leather jacket. He looked edgier and more alternative than the other kids, and he had earbuds in, bopping his head along to the beat.

Suddenly he caught her eye. Delia tore her gaze away and opened her code of conduct, pretending to be engrossed by the zillions of rules, but it was too late. He slid his earbuds out.

"You're that new scholarship kid, aren't you?" he said with a smirk.

Delia slowly closed the book, feeling even worse.

"Ugh, is it that obvious?" she said, bracing herself. "Are you going to make fun of me, too? Like Harper and her friends?"

"Are you kidding? Takes one to know one," he said instead. "Guess you already met our official welcoming committee. They're super annoying, if you ask me. Don't pay attention to them."

Delia looked over in surprise. "Wait, what do you mean?" she said. "You're on scholarship, too?"

"Art scholarship," he said, lifting one shoulder like it was no big deal. "Well, technically music. But they lump it all together. Guess it's easier that way. I'm Grant."

"Delia. And, uh…just *normal* scholarship here," Delia said. "No hidden talents."

"Nah, that means you're smart," Grant said, giving her a nod of respect. "Wanna hear my new beats?"

Delia felt a bit taken aback. He was the first person who was actually being nice to her at this school. Well, aside from the headmaster, but that

didn’t count. She felt herself letting her guard down. That wasn’t something she did easily.

“Yeah, sure,” she said, accepting the earbuds. She slid them into her ears. The tune was catchy with deep, thumping bass tones and a cool, upbeat piano riff. “Wow, you wrote this? It’s sweet.”

“*Sweet* just happens to be my middle name,” he said smoothly.

She blushed. “Do you post your music on PicPerfect? I bet you get tons of hearts and followers. What’s your account? I’ll totally follow you and heart your stuff.”

“PicPerfect?” he said with a frown. “What’s that? Never heard of it.”

Delia’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding.”

He just shrugged.

“PicPerfect is the hot new social media app,” she said. “Like everyone —*and I mean everyone*—has an account. Do you live in a cave without Wi-Fi?”

“Well, I guess I’m not everyone,” he replied. “Call me old-school, but I’m not on social media. I prefer to exist entirely in the real world.”

Delia laughed. “Are you, like, from Mars or something?”

“Yup, I’m a Martian,” he said, smirking. “You caught me. Wait… actually, that might be a cool idea for a song.”

He pulled out a battered notebook and started scribbling the idea down.

“Like, I’m really this cool alien checking out Earth,” he continued. “And shunning social media apps. And maybe I do live in a cave deep underground. That would be amaze, right?”

“Super amaze.” Delia giggled in spite of herself. “Hey, I want songwriting credit,” she joked. But then she turned more serious. “But don’t you want to share your music so other people can hear it?”

“Nah, I make it for myself,” Grant said, still scribbling. “And for my *real* friends. I love writing and creating it. I don’t care if random strangers like it.”

“Random strangers?” Delia said, still puzzled. She pulled out her phone to show him PicPerfect. “But once you friend them on social media, they’re your friends. You like each other’s posts. You stay in touch.”

Grant eyed her phone dubiously.

“I mean, come on. Your stuff is great,” Delia continued. “It could get really popular. You could even become an *influencer*.”

She was sure he understood *that*. He had to. In her mind, being a PicPerfect influencer was pretty much the greatest thing you could possibly become. It was one thing to have a high ranking at your school, like she and her friends did. But being an influencer meant having a top-ranked account in the whole world.

Grant just frowned at her phone, clearly noticing the devil icons marring some of the posts, pushing them down the rankings.

"But are they really your friends?" he said, sounding equally confused. "To me, it still sounds like a bunch of strangers judging your stuff. Why should I care what they think?"

"Maybe you're right," she hedged, clicking her phone off, even though she didn't fully agree.

Sure, she didn't know some of the people in her PicPerfect friend list in the real world, but some *were* her actual friends from her old school. And it did matter what they thought, didn't it?

"Like I said, I don't care what random people think about my music," Grant said, tapping his notebook. His eyes locked onto hers—they were very, very blue.

"But I do care what *you* think," he added.

"Uh, you do?" she stammered, feeling suddenly unworthy. Harper and her friends' snickers echoed through her head. What if he was just mocking her? Playing some kind of long-game prank?

But then he smiled and melted her fears.

"Yeah, because we're going to be friends in real life," he told her.

"We…we are?" Delia managed to say. An actual friend at this school? The idea sounded amazing.

"Yes, we are. I can feel it. Wanna make it official?"

Grant stuck out his hand and Delia shook it, feeling silly. She'd never shaken hands with someone her own age.

"Now you can't back out," he said. "We're friends."

"Real ones," Delia affirmed.

"Yup, real ones," he agreed.

Just then Harper and her friends filed into the classroom, clomping along in their House of De Vil boots. They passed by Delia's row on the way to their desks, forcing her to release Grant's hand.

He glanced at them, then rolled his eyes. "Harper and her Glam Posse," he said in a low voice. "I'm sorry she was mean, but don't let her get to

you. She acts all important around here, but she's actually pretty basic. All she cares about is her appearance."

"Thanks for the warning," Delia said as he slid his earbuds back in.

Harper shot Delia a withering look as she settled into her own desk. "Looks like the charity case made friends with the artsy weirdo," she snickered to Ella and Charlotte.

"Yeah, they, like, totally belong together," Ella added.

"Takes one weirdo to know one," Charlotte giggled.

Shame exploded in Delia's chest like an atomic bomb. Even worse, her new friend was witnessing her complete and utter humiliation. She glanced over at Grant, expecting a pitying look in return, but thankfully, he was preoccupied, scribbling lyrics in his journal and listening to his earbuds. He seemed completely oblivious.

Who cares what strangers think? she told herself, remembering his advice. Plus, she had her other friends. Aaliyah and Zoe were still her besties, even if they went to different schools. Delia tried to follow Grant's example and ignore the girls, but they continued to whisper and snicker from the other side of the classroom, casting side-eyed glances her way.

Delia caught bits and pieces.

"Scholarship kid…look at her clothes…did she find them in a dumpster…"

Delia started to feel short of breath. Her heart pounded in her chest. Their whispers sounded like the volume had been turned up, drowning everything else out. It was all she could hear.

Before Delia knew what she was doing, she jumped up from her desk and ran past the girls in their House of De Vil boots, bolting for the door. She grabbed the bathroom pass on her way out, their snickers echoing in her ears.

One thought shot through her head as her hideous, tattered boots flapped against the polished linoleum floors.

I don't belong here.

Delia bolted into the bathroom, struggling to breathe. Her heart thudded faster. She knew that it was probably a panic attack—not deadly, but it *felt* like she was dying, suffocating, about to black out. She'd had them before, but not since she was a kid, back when they lived in tight quarters in public housing and everything felt stressful.

I wouldn't be caught dead in those.

I wouldn't be caught dead in those.

I wouldn't be caught dead in those.

Harper's cruel words echoed through her head on repeat. Delia could still hear Harper and her friends laughing and whispering like they were right behind her, even though they were back in the classroom. The taunts felt real and immediate and very, very cruel.

Delia tried to steady her breathing by splashing cold water on her face. She peered at her reflection in the mirror. Her hair looked like a puff ball,

and her skin was splotchy and red from the panic attack. Not to mention the zombie zit. She looked horrid.

She couldn't go back to class like this. Not with Harper and her Glam Posse just waiting to pounce. She couldn't give them that much ammunition. She pulled out her contraband makeup, trying to touch up her face and cover it up. She brushed on pink blush and some cream eye shadow, then dabbed concealer over her zit and pulled her hair back into a low ponytail. When she was finished and felt calmer, she took a step back to survey her efforts.

Her jaw dropped. Somehow she'd made everything worse. Her already flushed cheeks just looked rosier, the eyeshadow was too much, and the concealer couldn't conceal the monstrous zit. It practically had a life of its own at this point.

It refused to die.

She turned on the hot water, splashing it on her face to wash the makeup off so she could start again. When she looked up, steam from the hot water had fogged up the mirror, distorting her face. With the smudged and running makeup, she looked like some kind of evil clown.

She leaned in closer, transfixed, a sense of cold dread sweeping through her.

Ping.

An alert from her phone made her jump.

Ready to post to PicPerfect?
Don't let your ranking slide!

Delia felt a vague sense of panic when she saw the alert. But then her eyes flicked back to her reflection. As if she could post looking like…*this.*

She clicked open the app to dismiss the alert. The home screen with the top trends loaded onto her phone. Sure enough, #HouseofDeVil was number one. Without thinking, she clicked on the hashtag and images splashed onto her screen.

Her mouth dropped open. The top trending pic was of…

Harper.

There was no mistaking her face or that stunning red hair. In her selfie, she wore an oversize Gilded Crest sweatshirt, skinny jeans, and the boots. She was posed with her head thrown back, like the camera had captured her

in a casual, effortless moment. Her loose red waves cascaded across her shoulders. Her skin looked flawless. Delia was sure that Harper was wearing makeup and used filters, but it looked so…*natural.* Her besties, Charlotte and Ella, flanked her, also posing in their trending House of De Vil boots.

In fact, all three girls looked like models in a teen magazine for top influencers.

Delia would give anything to take one picture—just one selfie—that looked half as perfect as Harper's post.

Anything.

Heart emojis filled Harper's comments, too many to count. Every second, more hearts popped up. Delia scrolled through the comments feed, knowing it was bad to hope to find a negative comment but wanting to find one all the same. She kept scrolling.

And scrolling.

And scrolling.

And scrolling.

Hundreds and hundreds of comments. But there wasn't a single red devil in sight. Those hearts had boosted Harper into the top slot on PicPerfect at their school, followed closely by Charlotte and Ella. The Glam Posse had the highest-ranked accounts at Gilded Crest.

Of course they do, Delia thought with a sigh. She studied the pic, envy pooling in her heart. It was a bitter brew but also somehow surprisingly tasty.

Delia tapped on Harper's friend list. Sure enough, all her friends followed House of De Vil. It seemed like they all had the boots. They all shopped at the fancy stores on Michigan Avenue. They all looked impossibly perfect in their profile pics and had way more followers than Delia.

If she thought her old friends looked perfect and fashionable in their PicPerfect posts, the Glam Posse at her new school took it to a whole new level. They weren't just popular and gorgeous and flawless—they were almost like influencers.

They were the definition of PicPerfect perfect.

They were everything Delia wanted to be, but wasn't.

She glanced back at her reflection, grimacing at her disheveled, clownish appearance. Then she looked down at her ratty old boots. Harper

was right—they were awful.

Delia felt her shame grow exponentially, just like Harper's friend list was growing every second because of the trending House of De Vil boots. Delia clicked on the House of De Vil official profile page. The fashion line's profile pic was a photo of a woman taken from behind. This was Cruella De Vil, the icon who was rumored to have started the fashion line back in the day. Though you couldn't see her face, her hair was half white and half black, parted dramatically in the middle, and her signature one-of-a-kind black-and-white faux-fur coat was draped luxuriously over her shoulders.

The Cruella Coat.

Delia had always thought it was weird that there were never any pictures that showed Cruella's face. Some people didn't believe that Cruella had ever existed. They thought she was an urban legend, or perhaps just a character invented to market the brand and give it cachet. But Delia wasn't sure what to believe.

She zoomed in on the pic, trying to find more clues about the mysterious designer. Suddenly a chill worked its way up her spine. The bathroom felt colder, and she shivered despite the hot steam wafting out of the sink, where the tap was still running full force.

Delia scrolled down to the House of De Vil boots on their page. The boots stared back at her. *I need those boots to fit in,* she thought. Even more, she needed them to post to PicPerfect and boost her ranking at Gilded Crest so she could win the respect of Harper and her Glam Posse—and somehow survive the rest of the school year without dying from extreme humiliation.

The boots would fix everything.

Delia had to find a way to get them. She knew that with such certainty that it made her mouth water. She shut off the tap and wiped the fog from the mirror. Her makeup was still running. She couldn't take a selfie in this state, but she had another idea.

She took a screenshot of the House of De Vil boots and tagged it—#wishlist #HouseofDeVil #fauxfurboots #fairygodmother.

Then she hit POST. After all, what did she have to lose?

Ping.

Suddenly her phone chimed as a direct-message alert popped up. Someone was DM'ing her. That was weird. It was from a strange account she didn't recognize.

She clicked on the DM. The profile pic showed a mannequin's expressionless face. The smooth plastic features were blank and unnerving. The name on the account was "Fashion Addict."

Delia scrolled through the feed, viewing the posts. Each image in the account showed a creepy-looking mannequin posed in different House of De Vil outfits, like something out of a storefront window. They were all black-and-white, the fashion line's iconic color palette.

Under the mannequin's profile pic, there was a short bio posted:
My friend wanted to be perfect.
#HouseofDeVil #RememberHer

Weird, Delia thought.

She flipped over to read the DM in her private messages. It was only one sentence—and it made her heart race.

Be careful what you wish for.

Delia read it, then reread it. Why would someone send this to her?

She quickly tapped out a response—

What do you mean?

The ticker blinked, indicating the other user was typing out a response. Delia's heart thudded in exact rhythm with the ticker, waiting for the next message to pop up.

Beware of the Devil Woman.
This is what she did to my best friend.

Red devil icons followed, one after the other, filling the DM page and making her phone *ping* nonstop. Delia's hands shook so hard she almost dropped her phone. It was probably just some fake robot account trying to scare kids. Delia knew they were common on social media apps. Her mom had warned her to be careful. Even so, she didn't hit BLOCK…yet.

The DMs ran through her head, making her feel even more unsettled. *Be careful what you wish for…Beware of the Devil Woman…This is what she did to my best friend.* The messages must have been triggered by her last post tagged with #HouseofDeVil.

But what did it mean?

With a shudder, Delia shut the PicPerfect app and clicked over to her texts. She wasn't going to let some online bully account or urban legend scare her off.

She pulled up her mother's number and tapped out a text message.

Mommy, pretty please?

Then she attached a link to the House of De Vil boots and hit SEND. She looked back at her reflection. It stared at her mournfully, so she forced a smile. She hadn't gotten this far in her life by giving up so easily. Harper and her friends may have teased her, but she remembered Grant with his goofy grin and thumping beats. Not everyone was like the Glam Posse.

She could still make friends here, right?

Plus, she had Aaliyah and Zoe in her corner, even if they didn't go to the same school anymore. They could still vid chat like they did that morning and trade comments on each other's PicPerfect posts. And they could chill on the weekends in Zoe's basement, or hit the skate park. That thought made Delia feel better. Who needed the Glam Posse anyway?

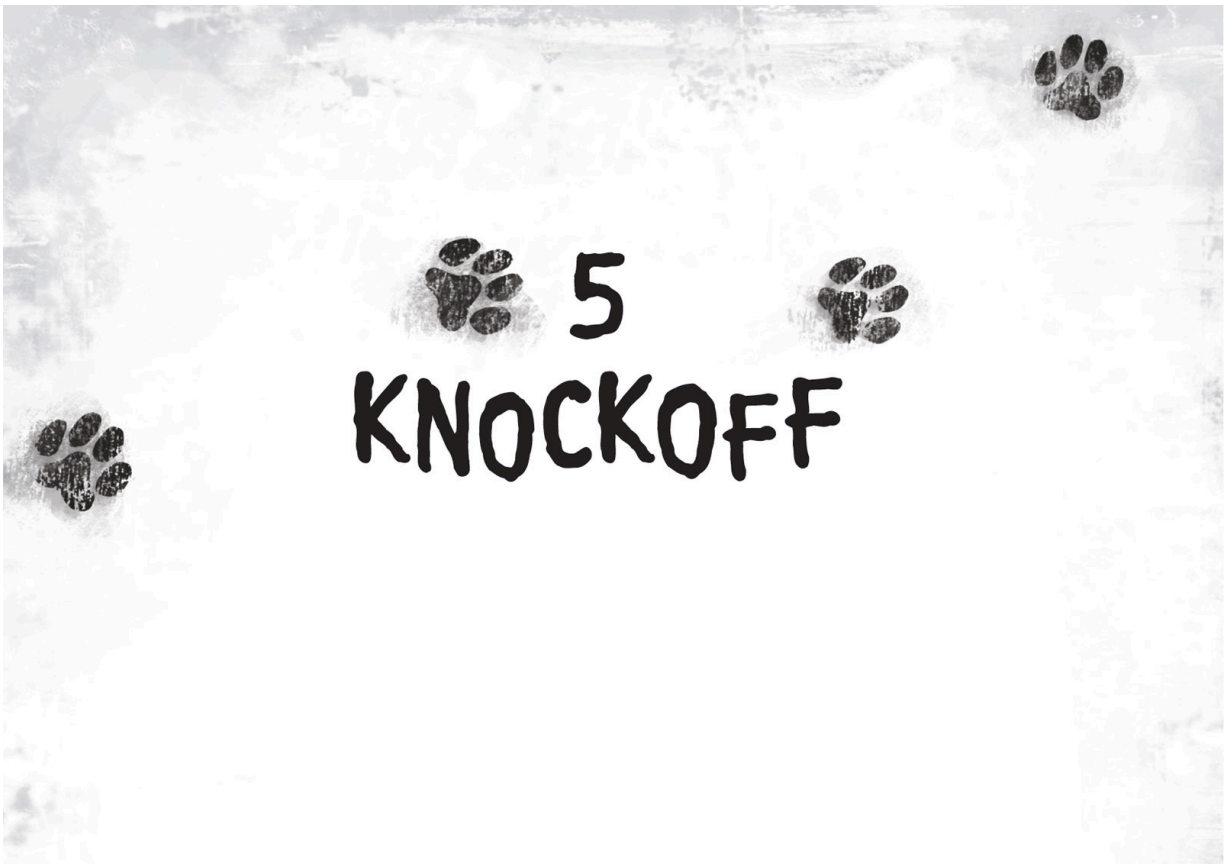
She took a deep breath and went to work fixing up her appearance so she could return to class. She couldn't believe she'd missed so much of her first period already but hoped the teacher would excuse her absence as first-day nerves. She retied her ponytail, then reapplied her makeup. This time, she looked…*better*. Not perfect, but better. That would have to do for now.

But then her eyes tracked down to her ratty boots.

Delia's face fell. The boots could not be fixed with makeup and concealer, or hidden behind a flattering filter. Despite her best efforts, she was never going to fit in here.

She had only one hope.

She needed those boots.



5 KNOCKOFF

"How was your first day at your new school?" Mrs. Smith trilled as soon as Delia trudged through the front door.

Delia had taken the train home—the "El," as it was called in Chicago. It was an elevated train, which meant that, unlike in other cities, which had mostly underground subway stops, the platforms where you waited were above the street; you were completely exposed to Chicago's punishing recipe of wind, rain, sleet, and snow, depending on the day.

On this day the sky had pelted her with a wintry mix of rain and ice, while the wind tore through her old coat—she was going to need a new one of those, too. By the time she got home, she was shivering and miserable. The perfect end to her very *not* perfect day.

"Horrifying," Delia groaned, slamming her backpack down for emphasis. "No, *worse* than that. Horrendous. Horrible. Hideous. Got any more?"

"You forgot…*horrific*," Mrs. Smith said, unable to contain a chuckle.

“Perfect,” Delia said, plopping down on the sofa in a funk. “And it’s not funny. My new school is awful. I miss my old school. And I miss my old friends. It’s not the same without Zoe and Aaliyah.”

“Well, I’ve got something that will make it all better,” Mrs. Smith said, then lowered her voice. “Just don’t tell your mother. We both know she doesn’t approve of sweets before dinner.”

“Where is she, anyway?” Delia asked, glancing around the town house for any sign of her mom, even though she suspected that she already knew the answer.

No purse and overcoat piled on the kitchen table. No neutral pumps cast off by the front door. No smell of her sweet, baby-powder-scented perfume wafting through the house.

She wasn’t here.

Her mother always worked long hours with her new law-firm job—the one that had enabled them to move in with Mrs. Smith in the nicer part of town. She often missed dinner altogether, or rushed home just in time, bursting through the door in a blast of cold, wintery air, breathless and clutching steaming takeout containers, only to gobble down food like it was her first meal of the day and then vanish into her bedroom to take night classes online. The steady *clack-clack-clack* of her keyboard would echo out. It was the signal to not interrupt her.

Of course, Delia loved her mother and appreciated how hard she worked, especially as a single mother who had to support their little family on her own. But often, Delia found herself wishing she had the kind of mother who could stay home and bake chocolate chip cookies and greet her when she got back from school in the afternoons, like some of her friends had. Not that baking cookies was her mother’s strong suit, even if she did have more time. It was her father’s fault, in a way. Delia understood that. But blaming him was like blaming some invisible force—or just thin air. She had no real concept of him, or what he was even like as a person. All she knew was that her mom believed they were better off without him.

But were they really? Delia didn’t always know.

She glanced at the clock, guessing her mom would be home late. *Again.*

“She’s still at work,” Mrs. Smith said, following Delia’s gaze. The clock ticked away the afternoon, which was quickly transforming into evening. In winter, the sun set extra early. “But she’s picking up pizzas on her way home. And then she has classes online tonight.”

With that, almost as an apology, Mrs. Smith handed Delia a steaming mug of hot chocolate. Tiny, pillowy marshmallows floated on the top of the rich, frothy concoction.

"Thanks, Mrs. Smith," Delia said morosely.

So she wouldn't have much time tonight to beg her mother for the boots. All the horrible things that had happened at school flashed through her mind again. Harper and her friends teasing her and laughing at her clothes. She felt so naïve for thinking she could just waltz into Gilded Crest looking like that and make friends with the most popular girls at the school. If her mom was right and first impressions mattered that much, then she'd sealed her fate today.

But she didn't want to give up. If she could somehow get a pair of the House of De Vil boots, then maybe she could change their minds about her and make friends. Or at the very least, fit in better and not get teased so much. Just thinking about their jeering taunts made her heart sink.

Still, as soon as she took a whiff of the hot cocoa, her mood lightened the tiniest bit. Mrs. Smith always had a way of cheering her up, even when it felt impossible.

"Anyway, I simply don't agree about the sweets rule," Mrs. Smith said with an approving smile. "Your mother means well, of course. But chocolate is practically its own food group. And it's appropriate any time of the day—or night, if you ask me."

Delia laughed in spite of her terrible mood. "Don't worry, my lips are sealed." The mug warmed her hands. "It'll be our little secret."

She sipped the hot chocolate and closed her eyes. It was rich and heavenly. The warm liquid ran down her throat, coating her tongue and heating her from the inside out. She sighed with relief. Mrs. Smith was the perfect counterbalance to her mother's strict rules. Delia often felt annoyed at them. Well, more like, *all the time*. But she knew that her mom was just trying to be a good parent, even if she went overboard at times, and probably in some way, to make up for her father not sticking around.

"There now, my dear," Mrs. Smith said, nodding as Delia inhaled the hot cocoa like it was medicine. "Chocolate has a way of making everything better, doesn't it?"

It sure does, Delia thought. She wandered over to the litter of puppies, who seemed to have sprouted more black spots while she was at school. They also seemed to have grown an inch each.

“Look, they’re growing up so fast,” Delia said, pointing to the new spots. The dogs were clearly thriving here, but that meant they’d be leaving sooner rather than later for their adoptive homes.

Delia put down her mug and snagged Radar by his neck, then cradled him in her arms, already missing him. As if reading her mind, Radar licked her face, then nibbled on her nose. She smelled his sweet puppy breath and smiled. Puppies liked you no matter what boots you wore, or how frizzy your hair was, or how many likes you got on PicPerfect that day.

Suddenly the phone rang in the kitchen. The old rotary one. It sounded like a fire alarm.

“Coming! Hold your horses,” Mrs. Smith called out.

She snagged the phone, holding it to her ear. “Hello?”

She listened, then said, “How did you get this number? I’m sorry, we’re not interested. Don’t call here again!” Then she slammed the receiver down angrily.

“Who was that?” Delia asked, looking over in alarm. “What did they want?”

Mrs. Smith rarely raised her voice, so her reaction to the call was surprising.

“Can you believe it?” Mrs. Smith said. “Somebody was trying to buy the puppies!”

“But how did they even know about them?” Delia asked.

“I guess the rescue listed them as available for adoption,” Mrs. Smith said. “But they’re sorely mistaken. We don’t *sell* puppies. We adopt them out to loving homes. Only after a rigorous application and thorough house inspection.”

“Well, did you tell them to apply to adopt a puppy?” Delia asked.

“No, you don’t understand,” Mrs. Smith said, wringing her hands. “They didn’t just want one puppy—they wanted to buy all of them!”

“Somebody wants to buy the whole litter?” Delia said in shock. She glanced over at the pen. They were cute now, sure. But they’d only get bigger and bigger and transform into rambunctious, full-grown dogs. “But why would they want that many puppies?”

“No idea,” Mrs. Smith said. “But they belong in a loving, adopted home. We’re not in the puppy-sales business. That’s just wrong. It goes against everything we stand for!”

Delia felt a surge of affection for her landlady. “That’s right, you belong with us,” she whispered to Radar, petting his head. Then she set him back in the pen. “Don’t worry, we’re not gonna sell you. We’ll find a good adoptive home for you. And your brothers and sisters.”

Just then the front door flew open, and Delia’s mom rushed through, carrying pizzas—and a wrapped box. The bitter wind whipped through the town house until she slammed the door.

“Sorry I’m late,” Mom said, out of breath. Her cheeks were red and flushed from the cold. “But I do have a special surprise.”

“Really, what is it?” Delia said.

“Oh, I simply love surprises,” Mrs. Smith added, clutching at her skirt.

Mom plopped the pizzas on the counter, then thrust the wrapped gift at Delia. The box was big enough to hold…a pair of boots. Delia’s heart started to race.

Could it actually be the House of De Vil Boots?

“Mom, what is it?” Delia asked, hardly daring to hope. She turned the box over in her hands. Her excitement was so strong and pure, she could actually taste it on her tongue.

“A special gift for my special student,” Mom said. “I got your text.”

“Oh, no way! Really?” Delia squealed, clutching the box.

“I know our budget has been tight lately,” Mom went on. “But I wanted to do something nice for you, since it was your first day at a new school. Plus, you do need them. Those are getting old.”

Delia’s old boots sat by the door, looking worn and soggy.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Mom said, clasping her hands together eagerly. “Go ahead, open it up.”

Delia tore off the wrapping paper. She lifted the lid and her eyes landed on a pair of black-and-white boots lined with tufts of faux fur. She couldn’t believe it. Her heart soared. This was the answer to all her problems.

“Mom! This is incredible! Where did you get them?”

Delia’s mother beamed. “Well, I couldn’t believe it, but I found them at Replay Vintage! According to the shopkeeper, I got really lucky. They’re super popular right now.”

“Oh, thank you so much,” Delia said, unable to believe her change of luck.

She lifted the boots out of the box and immediately noticed the label.

Haus of De Veel.

No. No, no, no!

This couldn't be happening. They were knockoff boots. A cheap imitation, not the real thing. Worse yet, they were clearly used. The fur inside was crushed down, while the soles were worn and scuffed up. And they had a smell, like somebody else's feet had been inside them.

"Well, aren't they great?" Mom said, oblivious. She peered at Delia excitedly. "Go ahead, try them on and model them for us."

"Mom, they're the wrong brand!" Delia said, feeling dismayed.

Her mother looked confused. She glanced at Mrs. Smith for help.

"But they're Haus of De Veel," she said, pointing to the logo on the box. "That's what you wanted. They look exactly like that picture you texted me."

No, they don't, Delia thought, making a mental list of all the imperfections. The cheap plastic soles. The leaching color of the faux fur.

"I asked for House of De Vil," Delia said, enunciating carefully. "These are…a knockoff."

Mom sighed in exasperation. "What's the difference? Nobody will be able to tell. They look exactly the same."

"No, they don't," Delia said. "It's obvious they're a cheap copy. Everyone at school will know we can't afford the real thing. There's no way I can wear these out of the house!"

The smile finally fell off her mother's face. "That's enough, young lady," she snapped. "You sound like a spoiled little brat. I raised you better than this."

Even Mrs. Smith shook her head at Delia's tantrum. But they didn't understand. Why couldn't they see that these boots weren't the real thing? And worse yet, would probably get her teased at school even more mercilessly than she already had been! She simply couldn't wear them. She would rather die. Harper was right. They couldn't afford the real thing. It was hopeless. She was never going to fit in at Gilded Crest.

"You're wearing them to school tomorrow," Mom said. "And that's final. They're perfectly good boots. I spent hard-earned money on them."

Delia threw the box down in anger. "But, Mom—"

"But nothing," Mom snapped back. "Now pick that box up. There's a gift card in it for the thrift shop, so you can pick out a new winter coat after school tomorrow, too. Your coat is getting old, and there's a blizzard forecast to hit this week."

“A new coat?” Delia said, feeling tears prick her eyes. “Everything in that stupid store is old and used. For once, I wish I could get something that’s actually new.”

“New things are a waste of money when you can get perfectly good clothing at half the price,” Mom said in a stern voice. “One day, when you have to work to pay for things, you’ll understand.”

No, I won’t. I’ll never understand, Delia thought, pouting.

“And I want you to get something warm and practical,” her mother railed on. “It’s going to be a long, bitter winter, according to the weather forecasts.”

Practical meant one thing…. *ugly*.

Could it get any worse? A hideous coat to go with her knockoff boots?

But Delia knew better than to argue more. That would only get her grounded, and worse yet, she’d lose her phone, the one good thing left in her life. It was the only way she could stay on PicPerfect—and connected to her old friends. In short, it was her lifeline.

“Fine,” she said quietly.

“All right, good. Now that that’s settled…want some pizza?” Mom said, trying to break the tension. “I got veggie, your favorite.”

“No thanks,” Delia said in a mopey voice. “I’m not hungry.”

Her mother exchanged a look with Mrs. Smith, but they both knew better than to push the issue. “Okay, have it your way,” Mom replied with a frown. “It’ll be in the fridge if you get hungry later.”

Delia retreated to her room with the boots and gift card, feeling utterly defeated, and slammed her door. At least she could message her old friends about how unfair her mother was being. Aaliyah and Zoe would totally understand. They’d get that her mom was the one who was acting totally crazy and unreasonable—not the other way around.

Everyone her age knew that knockoffs weren’t the same thing. So why couldn’t her mother understand?

Delia flopped on her bed and opened PicPerfect to a flood of alerts. Her heart raced excitedly when she saw them.

I got comments on my post!

But then she opened the app, her eyes falling on a slew of red devil faces in the comments under her pic wishing for the House of De Vil boots,

pushing her profile further down the ranks. But it got worse when her eyes fell on which users had left the devils on her post.

It was Harper, Charlotte, and Ella.

The Glam Posse.

Their bullying wasn't confined to the school halls. It had moved online, too. The other comments came from kids at Gilded Crest who she didn't even know, but who must have noticed Harper and her friends leaving devil comments on Delia's post.

Delia scrolled down her feed in horror. The devil faces left by her classmates seemed to laugh at her, taunting her—*You're not PicPerfect*, they seemed to say. Delia felt more tears prick her eyes, then fall down her cheeks and plop on her phone screen, blurring the images. Meanwhile, Harper's #HouseofDeVil selfie continued to trend at number one for her school.

This was undoubtedly the worst day of her life, from feeling completely out of place at her new school, to getting teased by Harper and her friends, to her mom buying her knockoff boots, to the devil comments on her PicPerfect post.

And it wasn't over yet.

I have to wear those horrible boots tomorrow, she thought before she fell into a restless, hungry sleep.

* * *

Delia ran through the school hallways as voices chased after her. The halls in this place were like a maze. She had to get to class, but she couldn't find the way.

"You're going to be marked tardy, young lady!"

The headmaster's voice echoed around her. Something heavy landed at her feet—it was the *Gilded Crest Academy Student Code of Conduct*. The book flipped open on its own, the pages fluttering. It landed on the chapter marked "Grounds for Student Expulsion."

Delia backed away in horror, then bolted for the front door. At least, she thought she was heading for the front door. Everything looked the same. The lockers around her flew open, their metal doors crashing, and hands

reached out to grab her—their fingernails manicured, trendy jewelry dripping from their wrists.

Charity case!

We wouldn't be caught dead in those boots!

Loser! Loser!

Cackling laughter surrounded her, making her sweat and bringing tears to her eyes.

Delia bolted into the bathroom and dove into a stall, shutting the door and latching it. Her breath burst out in ragged gasps. She reached down to tug off her horrible boots, pulling hard—

But they wouldn't come off.

The boots stayed stuck to her feet as if superglued to her soles.

She pulled harder, but no matter what she did, they wouldn't come off.

Bang!

Delia jumped back. Someone had pounded on the stall door. But she hadn't heard anyone come into the bathroom.

"Wh-who-who's there?" she stammered, pulling at the boots.

Bang bang bang bang bang!

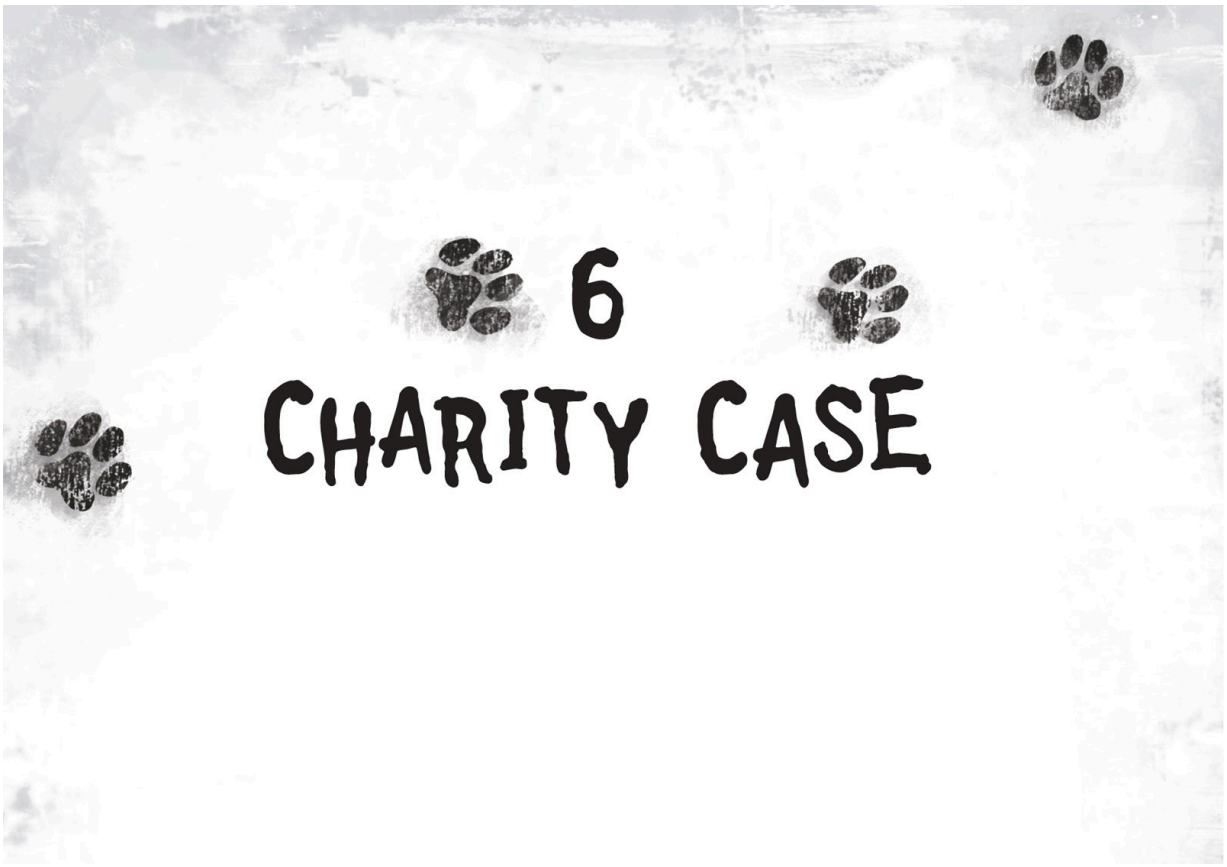
Could there be more than one person out there? Why were they all chasing her? What had she done wrong?

"Please! Leave me alone!" Delia pleaded, tears running down her cheeks.

She pushed down at the boots from the top, she tried to pry them off from underneath, she even tried to rip off the already torn sole, but it wouldn't budge.

Suddenly a tall, shadowy figure rose up behind her, cackling. Delia whipped around in terror. The figure had short, spiky hair that flew wildly in all directions.

"You're not fashionable enough to fit in here!"



6 CHARITY CASE

Delia woke from her nightmare and whipped back the covers.

Her heart thudded like a drum in her chest. She expected the boots to be there, still stuck to her feet, but her feet were bare. She could still hear the jeering laughter echoing in her ears. It took a moment for her breathing to normalize. She wiggled her toes, just to make sure everything was as it should be. The dream had felt so real.

It was just a nightmare, she told herself. *It didn't really happen.*

Still feeling jittery, Delia forced herself out of bed to get ready for school. She took a deep breath, surveying her shoe options. She had one pair of sneakers, one pair of flip-flops, and her "new" boots. The ratty old ones had been tossed in the back of her closet, but they weren't really an option. Not only did they not keep her feet warm, but also, she had no doubt that Harper and her friends would tease her relentlessly if she showed up in them again.

She stared at the box containing the knockoff boots, feeling sick to her stomach. The *Haus of De Veel* logo seemed to glare back at her. She didn't have a choice, though, did she? She dropped to her knees, pulled the box to her, and removed the lid. Her nose wrinkled. The boots even smelled secondhand.

Maybe they won't notice, she told herself, glancing down at the boots.

But she knew it was just wishful thinking, because she had no choice but to wear them. Her mom had insisted on it. Plus, Delia felt a little bad about last night's tantrum. Her mom did work hard and had tried to get her something nice. She clearly did not understand that these knockoff boots weren't the same as the real thing.

Steeling herself, Delia pulled on the boots. At least they weren't uncomfortable. She clomped downstairs, keeping her eyes on the shoes. Actually, they didn't look so bad when she wasn't staring right at them up close. Maybe, if she was really lucky, Harper wouldn't notice.

She entered the kitchen, avoiding looking at her mom or Mrs. Smith directly.

"Uh, I'm sorry about last night," she said to her feet, to the boots, and to her mother, who sat at the table sipping her coffee. The air felt thick with tension. Mrs. Smith watched silently.

"Apology accepted," her mother said, rising and sweeping her up into a tight hug. "I love you. You know that. Even when you act like…"

"A teenager?" Delia finished with a snort. "Yeah, sorry about that."

"Yup, that," Mom agreed. "Plus, I think the boots look super cute on you."

"Me too," Mrs. Smith agreed. "Not that anyone's asked me for fashion advice in ages. Though, back in the day, you should know, I had quite a few gentlemen suitors."

"Wait, you did?" Delia giggled. "What happened?"

Mrs. Smith glanced at the puppies. "Honestly, none of them loved me as much as my doggies. Well, except Mr. Smith, of course. But after he died, I didn't want to settle down with anyone else. And I was happy living here on my own."

"Honestly, Mrs. Smith, I think you get wiser every day," Delia's mom commented with a wry smile. She turned to Delia. "Today after school, you can go use the gift card to pick out a coat to go with them. Just don't forget to donate your old one. What you don't want…"

“Somebody else’s family might need,” Delia finished her mom’s sentence. She had heard that line a thousand times. But it was true. Delia knew because they’d been one of those families.

She glanced down at her feet, feeling cheered. Her mom was right. Maybe she could find a cute coat at the thrift store, even if it was used. She fingered the gift card in her pocket.

At least these boots were nicer than her old ones, right?

* * *

Delia rode the subway across the city, climbed down from the station, and headed for school. The sky was the kind of slate gray that promised bitter, cold weather and lots of snow.

She was grateful for her new, warmer boots. She passed under the ornate seal that marked the entrance to Gilded Crest Academy, inhaling the hallway smell—this school even smelled clean and sterile, unlike her old school, which reeked like the boys’ locker room. She liked that about her new school. Plus, not having to push and shove just to make it to class on time was a welcome relief. Maybe Gilded Crest wasn’t all bad; maybe there were good things, too.

But as soon as she stepped inside, Harper spotted her from the other side of the hall, where she was clustered around her locker with the Glam Posse. Just like yesterday, they looked like they’d stepped off an influencer’s feed—their makeup perfect, their hair effortless, and their clothes flawless. They had their phones out and were showing each other PicPerfect posts.

Each of them wore the House of De Vil boots—the real ones.

Delia froze the second Harper locked eyes on her. She watched as Harper’s eyes tracked down her body…and landed on her rip-off boots.

O-M-G, Harper mouthed, elbowing the other girls in the posse. Charlotte and Ella followed her gaze. It really did seem like these girls always moved in a pack.

Three sets of eyes fixed on her boots. Three sets of glossed lips broke into cruel snickers.

“Look at her *faux* boots,” Harper cackled, pointing at her boots and laughing. She aimed her phone at Delia.

“Nice try, charity case,” Charlotte mocked her.

“How could she wear those?” Ella sniffed.

Hot humiliation shot through Delia’s entire body into her cheeks, and her stomach clenched. Everyone in the hall—every single kid in her new school—turned to watch the commotion. She had hoped they wouldn’t notice. She’d even convinced herself that the boots weren’t that terrible. That her obsession with the brand was misplaced, like her mother had said.

But soon, more kids started laughing and pointing at her boots. It was just like her horrible nightmare. Even Grant noticed her this time, pausing as he walked by. He pulled out his earbuds, eyeing her with concern.

“You okay, D?” he asked.

But Delia couldn’t find her voice. She couldn’t take it. It was her nightmare coming true. She ducked her head and ran for the nearest bathroom.

“Delia, where are you going?” Grant called out.

But she ignored him.

The last thing she needed was for him to pity her. That was the last thing she wanted from any of her friends. Pity wasn’t kind—it was the opposite. It was embarrassing. Worse than that—it was cruel.

Delia flung herself into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. The jeering laughter faded away, but it wasn’t good enough. She ducked into the last stall and locked the door, feeling worse than she ever had her whole life.

That was when she noticed her phone was pinging nonstop. She pulled it out and checked the screen. A bunch of PicPerfect alerts popped up.

Delia’s heart all but stopped.

She opened the app and clicked on the alerts. Apparently, somebody had tagged her in a post—and not just anybody. It was Harper, who had the top account trending at their school.

Oh no, Delia thought in alarm. *She wouldn’t. She couldn’t!*

Delia clicked on the post—and almost dropped her phone.

Harper had posted a pic of Delia. In it, Delia was running away from her, hair flying, ugly boots on full display. Harper had even circled her cheap boots with a virtual red marker. The caption read:

#PHONY #KNOCKOFF #FAUXBOOTS #CHARITYCASE #GOBACK #PUBLICSCHOOL

Delia felt like fire was consuming her body. Under the post, hearts poured into the comments. All the kids in her new school were liking it, pushing the humiliating picture up the rankings for their school. Delia couldn't believe it.

Then familiar names began posting hearts as well—Delia's friends and classmates from her old school. When Aaliyah's and Zoe's names popped up, Delia almost threw the phone at the wall. How could they? Her best friends! She had never felt more betrayed. It was one thing for Harper and her posse to make fun of her. But it was a whole other level of terrible for her real friends to like the post.

Or the people she *thought* were her real friends.

Now Delia felt like the whole world was laughing at her. Her chest was tight. She had to get out of here. She couldn't face another day at this school. Just then another DM popped up from the mannequin account. Delia scanned the message.

Keep your faux boots. Trust me.

What did that mean?

Delia frowned at the message. Why would she want to keep the faux boots? They were ruining her life.

The plastic mannequin face stared back at her, offering no clue. Delia felt a shudder. Why was this stranger stalking her account like this? And sending her all these weird messages?

She quickly hit BLOCK and shut the app, feeling exposed.

Delia thought about ditching school, but she'd never done that in her life. She wouldn't even know how to do it, and she definitely didn't want to face her mom when she found out. No. She was just going to have to suck it up and get through the day.

She waited until the bell was about to ring, watching the seconds tick down on her phone, before slipping into class at the very last second, making sure not to make eye contact with a single living soul.

* * *

After school let out—the worst day of her life—Delia headed for the shopping district off Michigan Avenue. The wide, tree-lined street had the most luxurious designer stores. Town cars dropped off shoppers clad in designer clothes looking to add to their wardrobes, while other fancy cars squealed into parking garages or metered parking spots.

Delia trudged down the street from the train, trying to stay warm despite the punishing wind whipping off the lake, for which the street was named. Her eyes roamed over the stores, each fancier than the last one, with mannequins posed in their front windows and lit by glamorous spotlights. Not that she could afford to shop at any of them.

She was bound for Replay Vintage, which occupied a little storefront in a narrow side alley. It was off the beaten path for a reason.

As she walked in her faux boots, each footstep reminding her of the horrible day at school, she window-gazed. While not everything had gone terribly that day—at least she'd done well on her math quiz—nothing, not even good grades, could make up for the mocking laughter in the halls and Harper's post to PicPerfect. Delia distracted herself by studying the windows she passed. Mannequins in various glamour poses and adorned in designer garb stared back at her, while shoppers swarmed into the shops off the sidewalk, only to emerge with hefty shopping bags. Envy sparked in Delia's heart, cold and fiery at the same time.

She skidded to a halt in front of her dream store—House of De Vil's flagship shop. It was bustling with patrons browsing the racks and trying on clothes and shoes. Inside, girls her age snapped selfies—probably posting them to PicPerfect.

Delia watched them, her envy intensifying. What she wouldn't give to be able to shop there, too. She glanced down at her faux boots. The salespeople would probably peg her as a poseur the second she stepped through the door, just like Harper and her friends had. Or an alarm would go off to inform the whole shop that she didn't belong there.

She reached down and felt the hard outline of the gift card in her pocket. The thrift store was her only option. Still, she couldn't quite tear herself away. Not just yet.

The mannequins in House of De Vil's windows posed in black-and-white faux-fur coats, and each one of them wore the infamous boots. Knowing how expensive the boots were, Delia couldn't even imagine how much those coats cost.

She peered up at one mannequin wearing a striped coat, trying to imagine herself twirling in front of the mirror wearing it. The mannequin's eyes stared right back at her from its expressionless plastic face. A chill shuddered through Delia. The eyes seemed to be boring into her.

Feeling unsettled, Delia turned her attention to the next mannequin—this one in a plaid coat—and her heart jumped. This mannequin was looking at her, too, but she could have sworn that a minute ago it had been facing in the other direction. She moved down the sidewalk a bit and looked back again.

Wait…How…?

Now *all* the mannequins were looking at her, their heads turned in her exact direction. Delia tasted fear on her tongue. She blinked purposefully, and when she opened her eyes again, all the mannequins were looking away, their heads tilted in the opposite direction. What was going on? Delia's pulse began to pound. The mannequins were moving on their own. She was sure of it.

Or was she?

Mannequins weren't alive. They couldn't turn their heads on their own. And it wasn't as if they were actually *watching* her. She was just anxious and overtired. That was the only explanation. She should just get this ugly coat-buying situation over with and get home to do homework. Get this awful day over with already.

Resolutely, Delia turned away from the display window and headed down the street. As she was passing by the glass doors to House of De Vil, they whipped open, caught by the biting wind, and a pack of girls emerged. And not just any girls—

Harper and her posse.

No, Delia thought, freezing in place. *This cannot be happening.*

"Look, it's the charity case!" Harper sneered. "Did you like my PicPerfect post?"

The Glam Posse snickered at her. They all clutched black-and-white House of De Vil shopping bags stuffed with pricey merchandise.

"I see you're still wearing the faux boots," Harper scoffed. "What're you doing here anyway?"

"Yeah, you can't afford the real thing," Charlotte added with a sneer.

"That's right." Ella snickered. "You don't belong here."

The Glam Posse stared at her. Delia looked down, feeling humiliated.

“Wh-what’s the big deal?” she stammered, her cheeks burning. “My mom just made a mistake. She just got the wrong brand. They were out of my size and she—”

“Yeah, right,” Harper said. “Prove it. Show up to school tomorrow in anything House of De Vil and I’ll take that PicPerfect post down.”

Delia couldn’t breathe. Harper had called her bluff. She knew Delia couldn’t afford anything in that store. Not even a pair of socks or a keychain. But she couldn’t show weakness. Girls like them preyed on weakness.

It was what they lived for.

“Fine, I’ll see you tomorrow,” Delia said with as much confidence as she could muster, given the situation, even though she had no idea how she could follow through on her promise.

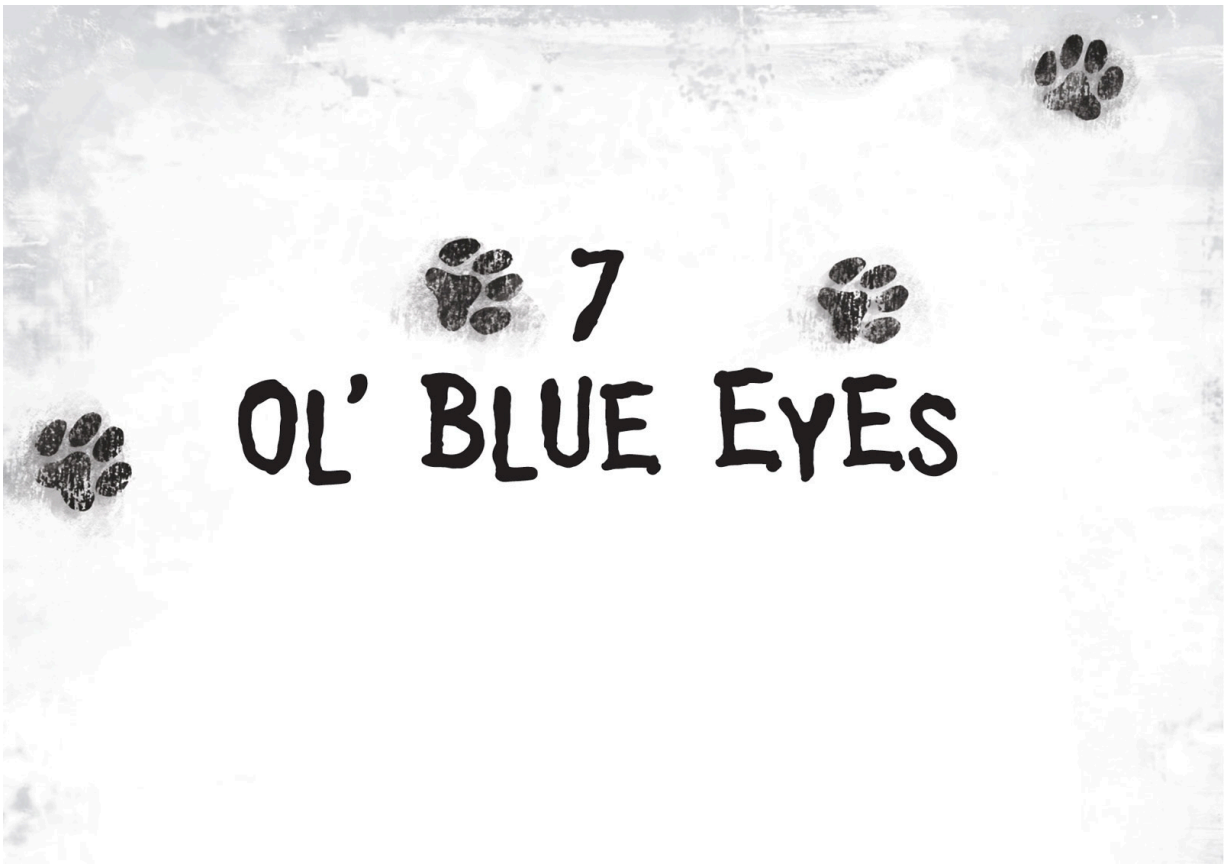
Then she turned and fled down the street, angry tears prickling her eyes. She didn’t belong at Gilded Crest. Why did her mom think it was a good idea to send her to that stupid school? And now, thanks to Harper’s trending PicPerfect post, she couldn’t go back to public school either. She’d be the laughingstock of the whole campus. Even Zoe and Aaliyah thought she was a loser now.

She thought about messaging her friends, or even vid chatting to see if it was just one big misunderstanding. But how could that be a mistake? They knew what they were doing and they had to know that she would see all their hearts and comments.

She needed Harper to take that post down, but there was only one way. Show up tomorrow in anything House of De Vil. The dare from Harper echoed through her head. But that was impossible. Harper was right. Faux boots were all her family could afford. She was doomed to be a charity case forever. She couldn’t show her face at Gilded Crest ever again.

Her vision blurred by tears and shame, Delia ran down the alley toward the thrift store, and she ran headfirst into someone. Her feet slipped, and she fell backward. She heard a familiar voice.

“Hey, slow down! Are you okay?”



7
OL' BLUE EYES

An arm reached out to steady Delia, keeping her from falling flat onto her butt. It yanked her back to her feet. She looked up, and her eyes locked onto— Grant.

"Uh, careful there," he said. "Training for the track team?" he added with a chuckle.

He'd dropped the paper sack of records that he'd been holding on impact, and colorful squares featuring musicians' faces and vintage artwork had slipped out across the ground. Luckily they looked unharmed. The snow had cushioned the fall.

Tears ran down Delia's cheeks. She tried to brush them away, but they kept coming, making her feel even worse.

"Y-you probably don't wanna…be seen with me…" she blubbered.

"Uh, why's that?" he said with a puzzled expression. He crouched down to pick up the records, dusting the snow off them. She started helping him. She'd never actually touched a record before. They were bigger and heavier

than she'd imagined, their cases almost as large as pizza boxes, though a lot slimmer.

"Because I'm a charity case," she said in a shaky voice. Her eyes fell to her boots. "Haven't you heard? I'm going viral on PicPerfect. And not in a good way."

"Uh, I don't have social media, remember?" Grant said with a grin. His eyes shone with amusement.

"Oh, right," Delia said, again amazed at how different he was from every other kid she knew. She hesitated, unsure if she should tell the truth. But something in his eyes, in his demeanor, made her trust him. "Harper posted a pic of my new boots, calling them knockoffs. And now everyone at school is liking it and making fun of me."

She pulled out her phone and showed him Harper's post. It had registered hundreds of hearts, pushing it up the ranks to the top of PicPerfect. Now even strangers were liking the most humiliating pic of her life.

"Why do they care what boots you're wearing?" Grant asked, sounding even more puzzled. He squinted at the post, then glanced down at her feet. "Actually, I think they're pretty cool."

"Pretty cool?" Delia exclaimed in horror. "How could you say that?"

"Well, if I was on that app, I'd give you a *like* for wearing them," he added. "Or a thumbs-up. Or a heart thingy. Or whatever you're supposed to do."

Delia just stared at him. "First of all, if you *heart* this post, then it means you like that Harper's making fun of me. You have to use a devil emoji…."

"Sounds complicated," he said with a shake of his head. His purple-and-black hair flopped into his eyes. "See, this is why I hate social media. Sometimes it seems like it exists only to make people feel bad."

"You're missing the point," Delia went on with a frustrated sigh. "They *are* knockoffs. You know, cheap imitations of a designer brand," she added, hoping he'd finally get it. "It's pathetic to not have the real thing."

"I dunno, they seem like nice boots to me," he said with a shrug. "You nearly plowed me over. Good traction for winter, right? And they look warm, too."

"Well, everyone else in school disagrees," Delia said with a sigh, shutting her phone. "I appreciate you trying to make me feel better and all

that. But, like, everyone's making fun of me on PicPerfect. Maybe she'll take it down, but only if I show up in the real thing."

"So let me get this straight—you need another pair of new boots?" Grant repeated, scratching his head. "Even though those seem perfectly fine? Just to impress Harper and her Glam Posse? And all the strangers on PicPerfect?"

"Yes, that's right!" Delia said, feeling like she was finally getting somewhere with him. "Only, I can't afford the real thing. Which is why I'm totally stuck!"

She stared at him expectantly. But Grant just shrugged again.

"That stuff on Michigan Avenue is all way overpriced anyway," he said. "You're just paying for the brand name. It's got nothing to do with the quality."

She stared at him. Now he sounded like her mom.

Who didn't care about the brand? That was crazy talk. She glanced down at her boots. But all of a sudden—if she forgot about the brand—they did look pretty cute.

And her feet did feel warm.

But that didn't matter.

"Well, most kids feel the opposite," she said, remembering what happened at school that morning. "Just ask Harper and her friends."

"Why would I care about her?" Grant said. "I've always thought she was pretty basic and superficial."

Delia's jaw dropped. Was he kidding?

"Well, she's got the top account on PicPerfect at our school," Delia said. "And she's the most popular girl."

"Well, I stand by what I said earlier," he said. "Plus, you're pretty awesome, if you ask me. You're so smart, people are willing to pay for you to go to their school."

His eyes locked onto hers, holding her gaze. Despite her humiliation, Delia started to feel slightly cheered up. Maybe she didn't need Harper and her friends to like her.

"Uh, thanks," she said, blushing.

She glanced at the storefront next to them. They were standing in front of Replay Vintage. The dusty display window featured mannequins wearing vintage clothes that looked like they came from another era—because they

did. None of it was remotely hip or trendy. It all looked slightly worn and frayed around the edges, too.

Delia caught sight of her tearstained face reflected in the dusty glass. Her hair was a frizzy mess. And that zit on her nose seemed to have doubled in size in the last hour. It looked angry and red.

"Ugh, I look hideous," Delia exclaimed, shrinking back from her own reflection. She tried to smooth down her hair.

Grant gave her a curious smile. "Actually, I think you look great right now," he said with a shake of his head. "Better than Harper and her plastic friends, in my opinion."

"Are you blind?" Delia said. "Can't you see all my imperfections? I'd give anything for a filter in real life."

"It's because you look like…you," he said simply. "The *real* you. And I happen to like you."

His words hung in the air, making Delia feel awkward. She appreciated his support, but had a hard time believing it was true. Couldn't he see her?

"What're you doing here anyway?" she asked.

"Oh, this is the best place to buy used vinyl," he explained, fanning out his collection of newly purchased records.

All Delia's music was digital, streamed directly into her phone. She'd never even noticed a record section inside the store. "But don't you have MusicList? The streaming app? Why would you want to buy records anymore?"

"Vinyl still sounds the best," Grant explained. "Warmer and richer and more human. New and trendy doesn't always mean better, ya know. These albums are like sonic gold."

He flipped through the stack of records. Delia fixed her gaze on one, not recognizing the singer in the black-and-white photograph. He was older with white hair and kind, clear eyes.

"Who's that old guy?" she asked.

"Oh, I should introduce you. Delia, meet Frank Sinatra," Grant said. "One of my all-time faves."

"Frank *who*?" Delia said. "Is he related to Frank Ocean?"

Grant chuckled. "Uh…you could say Sinatra influenced him. So, in a sense, they're *musically* related. Hey, you should come over sometime and listen to Ol' Blue Eyes."

"'Ol' Blue Eyes'?" she repeated with a frown.

“Yup, I’ll fire up my turntable for you.”

“‘Turntable’?” she repeated, feeling like a parrot.

“Right—it’s another term for a record player,” Grant said with a chuckle. “You’ve got every social media app, but you’ve never listened to an actual record or heard of Sinatra?”

“Guess not…but sounds like fun,” she added, even though she wasn’t sure that it actually did.

Grant glanced at his watch. “Hey, I gotta go to jazz band practice. But slow down, okay? I might not be here next time to cushion your fall with my vinyl.”

She watched him back down the alley with his collection of used records and a shy smile on his lips. He waved once, then vanished around the corner.

Delia smiled to herself. She’d never met anyone like Grant before. He was different from all her friends. Every kid she knew was obsessed with PicPerfect and social media, not to mention brands and fashion. She wasn’t sure what it meant—or what to make of it. Only that she kind of liked it.

8
Replay Vintage

The bell jangled as Delia pushed open the doors to Replay Vintage. Her eyes swept over the store, making her cringe. Dust swirled in the air, catching the light. She inhaled the stench of mothballs, mildew, and decay—and probably other things she didn't want to imagine.

The shopkeeper looked up from the register, one of those antique ones with real buttons. She had short white hair dyed with hot-pink streaks, making her look both old and young at the same time. She also wore vintage clothes and sported a pair of thick black-rimmed glasses that made her look super hip in an alternative sort of way.

When she saw Delia, she broke into a warm smile.

"Well, dear, hello there," she said. "Let me know if you need any help."

"Uh, I'm looking for the coats," Delia said, feeling self-conscious. This was the *last* place where she wanted to be shopping.

“Oh yes, it’s getting colder,” the shopkeeper said with a warm smile. “Back-left corner. We’ve got quite a fine collection. They’ll keep ya warm.”

Delia headed for the back corner, passing by the used kitchenware, vintage glasses, and bins of dog-eared books turning brown from age. The store was packed floor-to-ceiling with shelves and racks stuffed with unwanted things. All this junk that somebody got rid of.

She imagined their owners selling it here for a little extra cash, or simply depositing it in the donation bins out front, happy to be rid of it.

Whose lives had these objects been discarded from? What was their story?

It was sort of fascinating, but also…gross. Delia wanted *new* things, not used ones. She started flipping through the coats crammed onto the racks, searching for something that might pass as fashionable. Or at least, not hideous. The tiniest part of her held out hope that she might even stumble upon a rare designer find. Something Harper couldn’t tease her about.

Her mission was futile.

Every coat was puffy and ugly—in short, practical, like her mom wanted her to buy. Was it her imagination, or was each coat uglier than the one that came before it? Nothing even remotely designer appeared on these racks, like the coats that the mannequins modeled in the glam storefronts on Michigan Avenue, let alone something from House of De Vil.

Of course not, Delia thought. Nobody who owned that stuff wanted to get rid of it. These were things that nobody wanted, left here so some poor girl like her could find them.

If being taunted for her faux boots wasn’t bad enough, wait until she showed up at school in one of these monstrosities. *I wouldn’t be caught dead in that coat,* she imagined Harper saying, making her wince and contemplate what illnesses she could fake to get out of school tomorrow.

Measles. Mumps. Malaria.

All the scary *M*-ones flashed through her head, though she wasn’t sure of the exact symptoms of any of them. But her mom would never fall for it. She had incredible fake-sickness radar. She was basically a human lie detector. Delia felt sorry for any witnesses that would have to be interrogated by her mother on the witness stand one day, once she graduated and became an attorney. They didn’t stand a chance.

Delia pulled a puffy coat off the rack, checking the tag. It was used, but at least it had a decent name brand from an outdoor company—not that it

qualified as high fashion. And the price came in just under her gift card amount.

She turned to head toward the register, when suddenly she bumped into a mannequin shoved in the back of the store. The expressionless plastic face glared at her with empty eyes.

Delia jumped back in alarm.

But it was just a mannequin. It wasn't alive. It couldn't hurt her.

"I'd like to buy this coat," Delia said, sliding the coat onto the counter, along with the gift card from her mother. "And I'd like to donate my old one." Her mother had reminded her before school to do so.

The shopkeeper scooped the "new" coat up, feeling how soft it was. "Oh, what a beautiful coat," she said in admiration. "Hard to believe somebody didn't want it. But I guess their loss is your gain."

Delia felt a rush of humiliation. The coat was ugly. It wasn't what she wanted. She remembered all the glamorous displays on Michigan Avenue, desperately wishing she could afford something from House of De Vil. Or basically any other store on the street.

But that was impossible.

"Wow, and just under your gift card amount," the shopkeeper said obliviously, beaming at Delia. She rang it up. "Guess it must be your lucky day."

"Yes, I'm so lucky," Delia grumbled.

"Are you friends with that boy Grant?" the shopkeeper asked. "Saw you out front with him. He's in here 'bout every week asking if any new vinyl came in. He practically keeps my little shop in business, I swear."

"Uh, yeah…he's pretty cool," Delia managed. "We go to school together."

"He's a good guy. I'm glad you're friends with him," the shopkeeper said. "He's been shopping here since he was a kid."

She slid the coat along with a receipt into a Replay Vintage paper bag, then handed Delia a handful of loose change.

"There's the difference," the shopkeeper said. "Stay warm out there. Gonna be a tough winter, I hear. Forecasts are calling for a blizzard later this week."

"Thank you. I will."

Delia accepted the bag, then walked out of the store, feeling defeated. If her boots had gotten her teased, this ugly puffy coat wasn't going to help

matters. In fact, it would probably make them worse. Harper's dare to show up in House of De Vil was still fresh in her mind. The walk to the door seemed to take forever, even though it was only a few seconds. Delia put her hand on the doorknob, then glanced back into the store, toward the mannequin she'd bumped into. The mannequin's eyes seemed to lock onto her. Its blank stare sent a shudder up her spine.

Delia ducked out into the cold. The sun was setting fast, casting the alley into darkness. Her breath puffed out, freezing in the air. She pulled on her new coat and immediately felt warmer, but then she frowned when she caught her reflection in the window. It looked hideous, shaping her body into a fluffy blob. She turned toward the street, but then hesitated. The last thing she wanted was to run into Harper and her friends again on the way back, carrying the Replay Vintage bag and wearing this ugly thing.

Instead of tramping down Michigan Avenue, Delia cut through the back alleys that wound behind the designer shops. She passed behind the House of De Vil store, marked by a small sign above the delivery door out back. Then she saw something out of the corner of her eye that made her freeze. She skidded to a halt, kicking up gravel.

Her eyes widened.

It couldn't be.

Hanging on a lone mannequin in the alley right next to the dumpster was a coat. And not just any coat—it looked like the House of De Vil black-and-white color block faux-fur coat. The famous, iconic one worn by the mysterious designer who had founded the fashion line. But that was impossible. According to the lore that she'd read on their profile page, only one coat was ever made, making it priceless beyond all measure. The color block coat in the window out front was longer and cut differently from the iconic one. But this…this looked just like the original.

It had to be a fake. Maybe they were starting to produce copies of the iconic coat?

Delia glanced around to make sure nobody was watching. But the alley was strangely deserted. She approached the mannequin and peeled the coat back from the neck. As soon as her hand brushed the collar, she felt how incredibly soft it was, like nothing she'd ever felt before. Her heart pounded as she checked the label by the neckline.

House of De Vil Cruella Coat

The words stared back at her. The label was even stitched from fine golden thread, making everything about the coat scream elegance and glamour and high fashion.

This was *the* #CruellaCoat.

How could something this rare and precious have ended up in the alley? Were they planning to throw it out? Why was it here next to the dumpster?

With her heart racing, and even though she knew it was wrong, Delia peeled the coat all the way off the mannequin, stripping it from the stiff plastic arms. She just wanted to feel what it was like to wear something like this for once. That was all.

I'll put it right back, she promised herself.

She slipped out of the puffer coat and draped it over the mannequin. Then she slid her arms through the Cruella Coat's sleeves, pulling it over her shoulders. The coat seemed to settle in place, gripping her body like it belonged to her already.

It's like it was made for me, Delia thought, in awe that it fit her so perfectly.

She spun around in the alley. As the coat swirled around her body, she found herself falling in love with it. She knew she should put it back. Someone could walk out of the back door of the store or down the alley and catch her at any moment.

But she simply couldn't do it.

It was too perfect. It was like everything she'd ever dreamed of.

But there was more to it. Harper's dare to show up at school tomorrow in House of De Vil echoed through her head. Well, now she could show them all. This was exactly what she needed to impress Harper and fit in at her new school. Not to mention, it was perfect for picture day, which was only a few days away. She could always return it later, right?

Plus, they left it out here by the dumpster. It was practically like it had been abandoned. Even like they were going to throw it out. At least, that's what she told herself. She was good at putting together convincing arguments, a useful skill she had learned from her mother. She slid the puffer coat—the one that she'd purchased from Replay Vintage—over the

mannequin’s arms. She was just swapping the coats out. If one of these two coats was being thrown away, it should be that one.

Her heart thudded in her chest. She knew it was wrong to take the coat without paying for it, even if they left it out in the alley like trash. Technically, she was stealing from them.

But she *needed* this coat.

It’s not like she was doing it for a bad reason, right? Surely, they’d understand. Despite her sound reasoning, guilt sloshed in her gut. Quickly, before she could change her mind, she started down the alley away from the store. It was getting darker and hard to see. Mrs. Smith would worry if she didn’t turn up at home soon.

A cackling laugh rang out behind her. Delia froze.

Slowly, she turned around toward the back of the store. It was almost closing time, and all the shops were shutting down for the day. The alley was deserted, except for the mannequin wearing the puffer coat over by the dumpster. She was just convincing herself she’d imagined it, when the laugh sounded again, louder this time, making Delia flinch. It seemed to be emanating from the mannequin’s plastic face, even though the lips remained frozen. The mannequin’s blank eyes seemed to bore into her as it laughed and laughed and laughed.

Without thinking, Delia turned and fled down the alley, clutching the Cruella Coat close to her chest. The soft coat encased her body. She knew that taking the garment was wrong—terribly wrong. That was probably why she’d imagined that eerie laughter. Not to mention, it was getting dark and harder to see. Her eyes were probably playing tricks on her. But even so, guilt mixed with fear churned in her gut. She should go back and return it. She had to.

But instead, she clutched the coat even tighter, melting away her guilt. As she ran down the alley heading for the train station, she was certain of one thing:

She needed this coat.

9 SPOTTED

"How could you?" Delia's mother exclaimed the second Delia stepped through the front door wearing the stolen coat. "That coat isn't made for snow! It's completely useless. A waste of money!"

"You said get a coat," Delia sniped in her best teen voice. "So I got a coat."

She sashayed into the living room, brushing past her mother. Delia felt like a totally new person in the Cruella Coat. She even walked differently—like she was strutting down a runway. On the way home on the train, Delia had snapped a few selfies and they'd come out perfect.

Her skin looked flawless, her hair tamed, cascading in loose waves. And she hadn't done a single thing to fix herself up. All she'd done was shed her old coat like shedding an old skin—and slip into the Cruella Coat.

It was like the garment had magic powers. But of course, that was impossible.

Delia tried to ignore her mother's rant. The coat was everything she needed to make everything right tomorrow at school, not to mention boost her PicPerfect ranking. She ran her fingers over one sleeve, then the other, feeling the fine, downy faux fur. It really was softer than anything she'd ever touched. Well, anything other than the little puppies crawling in their pen.

Her mother glared at her. "I said a practical coat. That is not practical. I'm disappointed in you. You're returning it tomorrow! You know how tight our budget is!"

"You sound like you're stuck on repeat!" Delia shot back. "It's no wonder Dad left."

They stood facing each other, angry tears glistening in their eyes. "Delia!" her mother breathed.

"Mom, I'm so sorry," Delia started, seeing how much she'd hurt her mother. She knew how much her mom hated talking about her dad. Why had she even said that? "I didn't mean—"

But her mom stormed off, slamming her bedroom door. The house nearly vibrated from the force of it. Delia felt shocked. She was usually the one who threw the tantrums and slammed doors—not the other way around. Her mother was her rock. She always kept it together, no matter what. What was she doing storming off like that?

"Even adults have hard days sometimes," Mrs. Smith said, slipping up behind her. "Your mother means well, she's just under a lot of stress. Her boss is too demanding and hard on her."

Mrs. Smith handed Delia a mug of hot cocoa. She accepted it, feeling guilty. She sat down on the sofa, being careful not to drip onto her new coat, the magic of which seemed to have dissipated. Even the hot chocolate didn't make her feel better.

"It's because of that stupid job that she got me into this snooty school," Delia said, her voice thick. "And I hate it there. All the girls are mean to me. They call me…charity case."

Tears coursed down her cheeks. She couldn't help it. Mrs. Smith stiffened up. She went over to the pen, lowering her hand into it so the puppies could lick her fingers. Delia did the same thing.

"There's nothing wrong with accepting charity," Mrs. Smith said with a warm smile. "It means people care for you. That's a wonderful thing in my

book. Don’t let those mean girls tell you otherwise. You got into that school because you’re smart. And one day, you’ll see that you’re better than them.”

“I guess you’re right,” Delia said, even though she didn’t fully believe it.

She pulled Radar into her lap. He snuggled into her arms, sleepy. The puppies had been abandoned shortly after birth, just like Delia and her mom had been abandoned by her dad. They had that in common. Yet, the puppies were thriving, getting more spots every day.

Why couldn’t she thrive, too?

“That little one almost didn’t make it,” Mrs. Smith said. “The rescue told me. He’s the runt. They had to bottle-feed him to get him through. He’s lucky, though. So many pets get abandoned.”

“Not everyone finds a fairy godmother like you,” Delia said, giving the old woman a warm smile.

She was talking about the puppies—but she was also talking about her and her mom. She tried to console herself by petting Radar, but then she noticed something peculiar.

His fur was so soft, just like her new coat.

Delia felt a chill but pushed it out of her mind. It was just a coincidence.

After Radar fell asleep in her lap, she settled him back in the pen with his siblings, then escaped to her room. She still felt unsettled after the fight with her mom, and a bit guilty for taking the coat, even though it had been abandoned in the alley. *I can still return it in a few days*, she promised herself. *After I prove Harper wrong and get through picture day.*

Besides, they had, like, a zillion coats inside the store. They probably wouldn’t even notice this one was missing.

As she lay on her bed, rubbing her hands through the thick faux fur, a deep sense of belonging settled over her, like nothing she’d ever known before. She felt warm and safe. She rose from the bed, almost in a trance, and snapped a few quick selfies. She just seemed to know how to pose now with the coat gripping her limbs.

Click. Click. Click.

She checked her phone. In each pic, she looked amazing.

No, better than amazing. She looked…perfect.

Her skin glowed. Her hair was shiny and healthy-looking. And the coat draped over her body effortlessly, making her look glamorous. It was like a

stylist had appeared out of thin air and done her up, then a filter had been layered over her, even though she'd done nothing to the selfies.

Still, she waited to post anything. She wanted the coat to be a surprise for Harper and her friends tomorrow. She'd wait to post until the morning, when they could see her wearing it in real life and verify it was true. Then Harper would *have* to take down that horrible post. She dragged her fingers through the soft faux fur, feeling sleep tug at her. An effortless, dreamy beauty sleep. This coat would make up for everything bad that had happened to her that day. No, scratch that.

Everything bad that had happened to her in her whole life.

* * *

Yap! Yap! Yap!

Delia woke to a terrible sound—the sound of puppies crying and shrieking. They sounded like screaming children. She bolted out of bed and ran for the kitchen, sprinting down the stairs.

But the pen was empty.

No puppies.

Something creaked behind her. Delia turned, and a mannequin lurched toward her from the shadows.

Delia screamed, cowering away from the creepy figure.

"No, don't hurt me!" Delia cried, scrambling backward. She glanced around in a panic. "What did you do with Radar and the other puppies?"

The mannequin's expressionless face rotated on its plastic neck, turning slowly, then locked onto Delia, peering at her with an empty, eerie gaze.

"Give the coat back, thief!" the mannequin said in a robotic voice, even though its mouth remained frozen. *"You stole it! It doesn't belong to you!"*

"No, I'm sorry," Delia pleaded, backing away. "I'll give it back tomorrow. I didn't know it was your coat. I thought somebody was throwing it out. I promise, I'll return it—"

The mannequin lunged at her.

Delia struggled, trying to get away. But the plastic hands moved robotically and grabbed her by the shoulders. The mannequin stared down at her with its blank, empty eye sockets.

The lips didn’t move, but a cackle emanated from the frozen plastic face.

Delia fought harder, wrenching her body back and forth and trying to break the mannequin’s grip. But it was hopeless—she couldn’t escape.

Suddenly a dark shadow rose up behind the mannequin, growing taller and taller and looming over her. The sounds of puppies barking grew frenzied.

Another voice with a lilting accent cut through the kitchen.

“Darling, don’t you know that coat belongs to me?”

It came from the shadowy figure leering down at her. The mannequin’s grip tightened as she spoke, as if the voice was controlling the mannequin. Delia panicked, flailing about, trying to escape, but the mannequin wouldn’t let go. The plastic hands squeezed and squeezed, the sharp fingers cutting into her shoulders. Delia saw stars dancing in her vision from the pain. She gasped for breath, but none would come. She was too panicked. Her lungs started to convulse.

The last thing she saw was a cruel, wicked smile.

Then everything went black.

10 VIRAL

"No, don't hurt the puppies!"

Delia woke from her nightmare with a scream. Her neck burned from trying to breathe. She could still feel the mannequin's plastic fingers locked around her shoulders. She remembered the puppies screaming, and finding their pen empty.

She bolted out of bed and down the stairs, taking them two at a time, and rushed into the kitchen in a panic.

"Radar…" she said, skidding across the room. "Are you okay?"

But the pen was empty.

The puppies were gone.

Someone took them! Delia thought.

Panicked, she was about to yell out for help, when her eyes landed on the bay window in the living room.

It was a rare, clear, sunny winter day that made it feel warmer than it actually was. Mrs. Smith was outside in the small, grassy backyard with the

puppies. They were crawling around on the narrow strip of dead grass, which was dotted with puddles from the melting snow. The puppies played with each other, biting ears, noses, tails—basically whatever came within reach of their needle-sharp puppy teeth.

Mrs. Smith saw Delia in the kitchen and waved. A bright smile broke over her face as she beamed down at her miniature charges. She was in her happy place. Sunlight. Puppies. Helping needy souls. What more could she want?

Delia almost fainted with relief. *The puppies are okay.* Even little Radar was wrestling one of his bigger brothers, flopping around in an adorable way.

It was just a nightmare.

What had gotten into her?

But then everything came flooding back. She remembered how, in her dream, the mannequin leapt out of the shadows at her and called her a thief.

And that was exactly what she was.

A surge of guilt welled up inside her, making her throat constrict. That's probably what had triggered the nightmare—her guilt over taking the coat. She climbed out of bed, realizing that she'd fallen asleep wearing the thing. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes and peered at the coat in the mirror. Instantly, a deep feeling of possessiveness washed through her.

Compared to her appearance over the previous two days—with the zombie zit on her nose and frizzy hair—she looked flawless this morning. The monster zit had magically vanished and her skin was perfection. It looked like a filter had been layered over her reflection, but that was impossible.

This was real life.

It had to be the coat, she realized with a start. Maybe there really was something magical about it. And if that were the case, how could she ever give it up?

But then she remembered her fight with her mom the night before and the nightmare she'd just suffered through. How could she *not* take the coat back?

Delia stared into her own eyes in the mirror. A day or two. That was all she needed. Then she could return it to the store.

In the meantime, she needed to show up at school and prove Harper and her friends wrong. She had to show them that she could wear House of De

Vil and pull it off. All she needed was for Harper to take down the horrible post about her. Then, maybe, she'd even change her mind about Delia and want to be friends.

Buoyed by that thought, Delia stripped the coat off to change her clothes and get ready for school, draping it carefully across her bed. She hated not having the coat on for even a few short minutes. She kept glancing at it to make sure it was real and still there on the bed.

That it wasn't something she'd imagined.

Ping.

Ready to post to PicPerfect?
Don't let your ranking slide!

This time, Delia was actually excited by the alert on her phone. She slipped back into the Cruella Coat and spun around. Stretching her arm overhead, she snapped a few quick selfies in different poses, her head thrust back, her hair falling over her shoulders.

Click. Click. Click.

Then she flipped through the pics on her phone. The Cruella Coat made her look more glamorous with its color block pattern and beautiful tailoring. It hugged her body in all the right places, looking both warm and sumptuous, yet sleek and fashionable at the same time.

But it was more than the coat.

Every selfie she took came out flawless, even without using any filters or doing any corrections. She compared them to her prior selfies, all posted in her feed, from before she'd discovered the coat. She couldn't believe how different she looked in the new ones. She almost didn't recognize herself. But it was her—just a more perfect version of her.

Usually, Delia hated every single selfie she snapped. They never seemed to come out right. She could always pick out flaws in her appearance. But not today. It was true. The coat had some sort of magical powers.

This was what she had always dreamed about. This coat was the answer to all her prayers. She quickly posted a collage of selfies to PicPerfect without filters and tagged them.

#HOUSEOFDEVIL #NOFILTER #SELFIE

The second she hit POST, she felt a secret thrill, imagining what people would say. She clutched her phone as she waited for her PicPerfect post to go live, but before she could see it, her mom yelled at her to get ready for school.

"Coming!" Delia called out in a cheerful voice. For the first time all week, Delia was actually excited to go to her new school. She couldn't wait for Harper to see her wearing the Cruella Coat—to prove her and the Glam Posse wrong. Not to mention Aaliyah and Zoe. They would so regret hearting Harper's awful, embarrassing post.

Delia sashayed into the kitchen wearing the coat. She could feel a smile stretching her lips. She was even…*humming*. This was very unlike her, but she couldn't hide her good mood.

Her mother looked up from her coffee in surprise.

"Well, someone's in a good mood today," she said, looking Delia up and down. Delia stood there in the coat. She cringed for a second, expecting another fight. Or for her mother to demand that she return it again, which was the last thing Delia wanted to do at that moment.

"Listen, Mom, I'm sorry about last night…" Delia started.

But then to her surprise, her mom gave her an approving nod.

"I have to admit, that coat suits you," Mom said. "Maybe I was wrong about it. It does look awfully warm and stylish. Maybe I should get one, too."

Delia's mouth dropped open in shock. Her mother almost *never* admitted when she was wrong, even when it was obvious. Another reason she would probably make a great attorney.

"I completely agree," Mrs. Smith said from the sofa in the living room. She caught Delia's eye and winked conspiratorially. Clearly, she'd been working on her mother to change her mind about the coat.

Delia grinned, pulling the coat tighter around her and stroking the soft faux fur. She glanced at the puppies in their pen and realized she was growing up and getting her own metaphorical spots now, too. This coat was changing everything. It was making her life better in ways that were more than just purely fashion-related. She couldn't fully explain it.

All she knew was this was going to be the best day ever.

* * *

The second Delia stepped into Gilded Crest Academy wearing her new coat, students flocked over to her like she was famous. She strutted down the hallway, the coat swishing luxuriously around her ankles. She felt like a celeb. Or an influencer.

Yeah, there was no way she was returning this coat. At least, not yet. Harper met Delia's eyes, then approached with Charlotte and Ella on her heels. They all wore their House of De Vil boots as they clomped toward her down the hall. The hallway grew hushed, but Delia stood her ground. She placed her hands on her hips, feeling the soft faux fur of the coat. It gave her the confidence to face them.

Harper came to a halt right in front of her. Delia braced herself as the mean girl gave her a sharp up-and-down look, then cocked her eyebrow.

"Did you check your PicPerfect account recently?" Harper said.

"Uh, why? Did you see my morning post?" Delia said, twirling her hair around her finger and trying to sound nonchalant.

"Did I see it?" Harper said. "Uh, like, the whole world saw it."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Delia said in surprise. In the rush to get to school, she hadn't checked her phone since she got off the train. Sure, her morning selfie had been racking up plenty of hearts from some Gilded Crest kids. Even Aaliyah and Zoe had sent her hearts. Maybe she would forgive them for liking Harper's post yesterday. Maybe.

"Your post, like, totally went viral," Harper said. "And everyone is majorly hearting it!"

"Yeah, just a few minutes ago," Charlotte added with an excited squeal. "A bunch of people started sharing it and it was trending and then…*boom.* It's everywhere suddenly."

"You're practically like an influencer now!" Ella chimed in.

The Glam Posse nodded excitedly, looking at her like she was a superstar.

"It did…what?" Delia said, unable to believe it. She pulled out her phone and checked the comments on her post. Sure enough, hearts spilled down the feed, pushing her post to the top of the ranks. Not even one devil face appeared. The only accounts ranked higher at her school were…the Glam Posse. She couldn't believe her eyes. All her wishes were coming true.

Harper studied Delia's coat in awe.

“Gotta admit it, I didn’t think you’d really pull it off,” Harper said. “After your post, I had to see it for myself. I thought it would be another fake. But look at that coat!”

“I…Yeah…I know, right?” Delia stammered, still reeling from the shock.

“Like I almost died of FOMO when I saw your post,” Charlotte added, her long, dark hair swishing around her shoulders. She pursed her lips approvingly.

“And it looks like an actual Cruella Coat!” Ella chirped up, studying the distinctive black-and-white pattern. “They’re super rare and, like, impossible to get.”

“Like, *super* rare,” Harper added. “I heard there was only *one* made.”

“Well, I don’t know about that,” Delia said, trying to sound chill. “But I know I’m super lucky to have this one.”

“Look, I’m sorry I doubted you,” Harper said, looking genuinely apologetic. “I guess you were just trying to play it cool your first couple of days here.”

“Uh, thanks,” Delia said. “And yeah, that’s exactly right.”

Harper looped her arm through Delia’s, leading her down the hall. Charlotte and Ella trailed behind them. Other students stopped to stare as they passed by. They’d all seen her post by now. She could hear them whispering.

“Wow, look, it’s her!”

“That coat is gorgeous!”

“So where did you get it?” Harper asked, pulling Delia close and whispering in her ear. Her fingers stroked the faux-fur sleeve. “You’ve gotta hook me up. I’ve been on the House of De Vil waiting list for a coat forever. And you got the *color block* one. You can’t even order that one!”

The Glam Posse stared at her excitedly. Harper met her gaze and lowered her voice.

“You gotta tell me your little secret…how did you find it?” she cooed.

“Uh…I promised I wouldn’t tell,” Delia said. Her throat went dry. She couldn’t confess to Harper she stole it. Or, well, lifted it from the garbage. Sort of.

An irritated look crossed Harper’s face, but it was gone as fast as it appeared.

“Okay, well stick with us,” Harper said with a smile. “You belong in the Glam Posse.”

A thrill went through Delia’s chest. *The most popular girls in school want to be my friends.* She knew it was superficial to care about things like PicPerfect rankings and popularity, but she couldn’t help it. Plus, she needed to make friends at her new school, right? Might as well be the Glam Posse.

They continued down the hall, as all the students parted to let them pass. Delia had to admit, being popular again felt great. And this was even better than her old school. They strutted to class, she and Harper arm in arm, with Charlotte and Ella close behind. Her phone kept pinging as more and more hearts poured onto her post. The selfie kept getting more popular.

Everything was going better than ever. “Wait, let’s take a selfie,” Harper squealed. “Like, together, okay?”

“Really, you want to take one with me?” Delia said, stunned.

“Of course, you doof,” Harper said with a wink. “And if we tag each other, it will boost both our PicPerfect rankings. It’s, like, a win-win scenario.”

Before Delia could object, Harper whipped out her phone and cocked her head, posing with Delia.

Click. Click. Click.

She snapped a bunch of selfies. Delia posed, feeling glamorous with her new, trendy friend and high-fashion coat. Every selfie came out perfect.

She couldn’t believe how different today was from the day before. She had popular friends. She had a viral PicPerfect selfie. She was fitting in at her new school. Even her mother seemed to like her new coat now, and wasn’t mad at her anymore. Could her life be any more perfect?

But then she locked eyes with Grant, who was standing across the hallway. He just shook his head in dismay and turned away.

“Hey, wait,” Delia called, rushing over to him. But he didn’t stop.

“I thought you were different,” he said with a frown when she caught up to him. “But I barely recognize you. You’re just like them.”

“No, it’s just nice to have friends again,” she said. “You don’t know what it’s like changing schools. I’m the same person you met that first day.”

“Actually, I do know what that’s like. You think Harper’s your real friend?” he replied, glancing over at the girls. “Good luck with that. She’s just using you. They all are.”

“What do you mean?” Delia said.

But he didn’t respond. He just slid his earbuds back in, turned up his beats, and headed for class. Delia’s stomach flipped, but then Harper whispered to her.

“Who cares about that loser?” she said, glaring at Grant’s back. “He’s a scholarship kid. Did you know that?”

Delia swallowed hard against the bad feeling in her stomach.

“Oh, right,” she agreed. “He’s a…loser. Who needs him, right?”

But what she was really thinking was *I’m a scholarship kid, too.* Had Harper forgotten?

Suddenly her phone pinged, making Harper shriek in excitement. “OMG, look at all the hearts on our selfie.”

“Wow, we’re the two top-ranked accounts at Gilded Crest,” Delia said.

She couldn’t believe her eyes. Thanks to her new coat and selfie with Harper, her account had soared to the number-one slot. She was even ranked higher than Harper. All the hearts and new followers pouring into her phone made her whole body tingle with excitement.

“Look, we’re almost PicPerfect famous!” Harper said. “Which is, like, better than normal famous. We’re basically celebs at our school now.”

“You mean like influencers?” Delia said, meeting Harper’s gaze.

“Exactly,” Harper said, eyes wide. “Stick with me, and we can stay at the top. How does that sound?”

“It sounds…amazing,” Delia said as Harper led her to class.

Without a doubt, this was already shaping up to be the best day of her life. She stroked the soft sleeve of her Cruella Coat, butterflies dancing in her stomach.

She would do whatever it took to stay at the top with Harper.

* * *

Sitting still and not checking her phone in class was…impossible.

Delia squirmed in her seat, twitching to check her PicPerfect ranking and how many hearts her posts were getting. She couldn’t pay attention to the teacher, or focus on any of the lessons.

Finally she bolted out of her seat and grabbed the bathroom pass. She waited until she got into the bathroom to check her phone, which felt like an

eternity.

With sweaty palms and a racing heart, she unlocked her phone and opened PicPerfect. Then she gasped in excitement at what she saw.

More and more hearts had continued coming in, keeping her ranking at the top for their school. And all because of a coat. Delia admired her reflection in the mirror, stroking the soft fur. This was all thanks to the House of De Vil. Their mysterious designer—if she was even a real person—was clearly some kind of genius.

Her phone pinged again, a new alert flashing on it. She checked the message.

PicPerfect Tip:
Keep posting new selfies to keep your ranking high!

Oh no, she thought. She needed to snap a new selfie right away. She couldn't risk her ranking slipping, not now that she had the top slot at Gilded Crest. Just look at how fast her account had risen in the rankings. The truth was, it could fall just as fast, if not faster.

She aimed her phone at her face, tilting her neck, putting her hand on her hip.

Click.

She snapped a selfie. But then out of the corner of her eye, she saw something dart past the mirror. As if it were *inside* the mirror itself.

Delia paused. Her heart gave a little thump of warning.

She glanced around the bathroom, but she was the only one in there. She must have been seeing things. She was about to hit POST and upload her selfie when she saw it again.

Her eyes tilted up to the mirror—and met her own reflection. Then the strangest thing happened.

Her reflection grinned at her.

Delia gasped. Because *she* was not smiling. She was sure of it. Her face was rigid.

Fear shot through her like an electric current. Slowly, she backed away from the mirror. But her reflection didn't move in sync with her. It stayed right where it was.

"What? This isn't…"

The mouth of her reflection didn’t move as she spoke. It glared at her; then, as Delia stood frozen in silent terror, her reflection’s lips did move. They mouthed one word:

Thief.

Delia fled from the bathroom, almost dropping her phone. Sweat beaded on her forehead.

Once she was back in the hallway, she felt a bit calmer. She was seeing things. That was the only possible explanation. Her guilt over taking the coat was probably making her see things that weren’t there. Her reflection couldn’t move on its own.

Maybe she should return the coat after all. She’d promised herself she’d take it back.

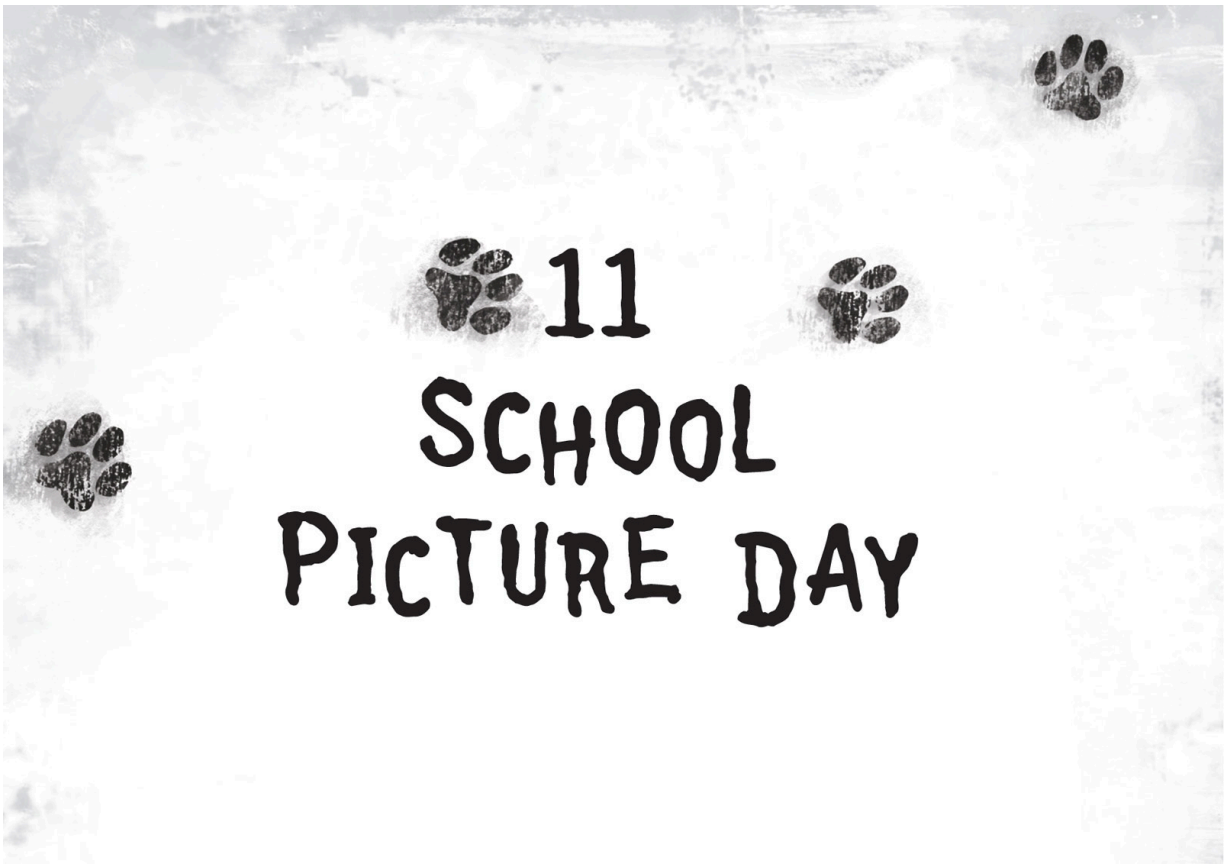
But then she reached out and stroked the coat, feeling that weird possessiveness again. The soft faux fur caressed her fingers. She needed the coat to fit in at school and keep her new friends and PicPerfect ranking. She had to take at least a few more selfies in it.

Plus, school picture day was on Monday. Another few days wouldn’t make a difference, would it?

She caught sight of herself in the glass of a framed award of some kind, and something came over her.

“Forget it,” she whispered to herself, almost fiercely. She wasn’t sure where that feeling came from, but she kind of liked it. “I’m keeping the coat. It’s mine and I deserve it.”

She couldn’t let anything ruin the best day of her life, right?



Over the weekend, Delia slept with the coat draped over her like a second skin, not wanting to let it out of her sight. She woke up on Monday morning before her alarm, excited to get out of bed for school.

It's school picture day, she thought, unable to believe that realization made her happy. Usually, she dreaded picture day and agonized over how to do her hair and what outfit to wear.

But she knew that as long as she wore the Cruella Coat, all her pictures would come out perfect.

When she climbed out of bed, though, it was hard to lift the coat off of her. And her limbs felt tingly and stiff, almost like they didn't want to bend. She flexed her arms a few times and did some squats, and the sensation wore off.

That's strange.

Maybe she'd just slept weird. She slipped the coat on and peered in the mirror, twirling around and feeling the soft faux fur. She snapped a few selfies and posted them to PicPerfect, needing to keep her feed fresh with new content for her friends at school and her top ranking.

Click. Click. Click.

POST. POST. POST.

#MORNINGLOOK #RISEANDSHINE #NATURALLOOK #HOUSEOFDEVIL #CRUELLACOAT

She watched as the hearts poured in—not a single red devil face in sight.

Harper hearted it, then Charlotte and Ella followed suit, and also her friends from her old school. Aaliyah and Zoe sent hearts. She still hadn't talked to them since they'd liked Harper's bullying post, even though she knew it didn't make sense not to forgive them. She'd forgiven Harper, and they'd become friends.

But that was part of it, too. Now that she had new friends at her new school—*glamorous* friends—she didn't need Zoe and Aaliyah so much anymore. When she switched schools, every other thought had been about how much she missed her old friends. Now it was more of an occasional afterthought, when their DMs pinged her phone. She hadn't returned the last few messages. She was just busy with her new school, she told herself. But she knew it was something else. Something deeper.

She scanned their latest messages, feeling a stab of guilt.

AALIYAH: Rad coat! You look so glam. How's that fancy prep school?

ZOE: Wassup, D! We MISS you so much. School isn't the same without u

Her mind flashed to Harper, and how they'd been inseparable at school yesterday, walking to class and lunch together arm in arm, snapping selfies

all day. She'd also started to like Charlotte and Ella. All three girls had attended Gilded Crest since kindergarten. Occasionally, their inside jokes made Delia feel left out. And their lifestyles sounded so exotic, with family vacations to places like Bali and the Maldives. But it was expected when switching schools that you'd have to adjust to different things. At least, that's what her mother had told her. She tried to hide it and play along, act like she totally belonged. Of course, she didn't mention that her little family didn't actually take vacations. Mom was always too busy with work and law school, not to mention their tight budget.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

Suddenly her phone rang with an incoming vid chat. It was from Aaliyah and Zoe, probably on their way to school. Her finger hovered over the ANSWER button.

But then a DM came in from Harper.

HARPER: OMG, school pic day!
R u wearing the coat?

Delia ignored the vid chat, hurrying to write Harper back. She didn't want to keep her waiting. Delia did feel slightly guilty, so she shot Aaliyah and Zoe back a quick DM.

DELIA: Busy with school pic day today!
Chat later!

I have new friends now.

She didn't have time to worry about her old ones. She had to get ready for school. She didn't want to be late, or miss her slot for getting her picture taken. It was going to be her best school picture yet.

* * *

Delia lined up with Harper and the Glam Posse in the auditorium to get their pictures taken for the yearbook, excitement welling in her chest.

"We're gonna look so cute," Harper said, fluffing her hair, teasing out the waves. She applied a layer of pink lip gloss, then passed it over to Delia.

Delia followed her example, layering it on. It tasted sweet, like roses. She handed it back to Harper, but then she caught Grant's eye. He was standing in the back of the line of students, with his hoodie over his shaggy hair and his earbuds in, bopping his head to the beat.

Their eyes met. He shot her a little lopsided smile. But then his eyes flicked over to Harper, and he looked away quickly. Wincing, she remembered what he said yesterday.

You think Harper's your real friend?…She's just using you. They all are.

She wanted to deny it, but then she remembered something else. Harper said taking selfies together would boost their rankings. But Delia already had claimed the top spot, thanks to her coat. What Harper and her friends really meant was it would boost *their* rankings.

But she decided not to think of it that way. Best friends always took selfies together. They did everything together, in fact. That's how it had been with Aaliyah and Zoe. They posted group selfies to PicPerfect all the time.

What did Grant know about having friends? He wasn't even on social media. He didn't care about brands or fashion. He listened to old records. Maybe Harper was right about him.

But then why did she feel so sad that he seemed upset with her now?

Delia reached the front of the line. But instead of her usual attack of nerves, she felt confident and glamorous. She adjusted the Cruella Coat, feeling the soft swish of velvet-lined faux fur around her hips. Then she strode forward, walking with a poised grace to her gait.

"Good luck," Harper squealed. "Knock 'em dead, diva."

Delia took her place in front of the backdrop, jutting her hip out and posing like the girls in the magazines. The photographer suddenly perked up when he saw her and aimed the camera.

"Nice coat," he said in a British accent. "Now give me a smile."

Flash. Flash. Flash.

He snapped several rapid-fire pictures of her. When he was done, he checked his camera and frowned. He called his assistant over and they talked heatedly, gesturing at the camera.

"Uh, what's wrong?" Delia asked, suddenly self-conscious.

All the kids in line were staring at her, including Harper and Charlotte and Ella. They looked confused, whispering among their little posse. Even

Grant slid out his earbuds, watching her with concern etched on his face. They were all thinking the same thing.

What was taking so long?

Most of the kids were in and out of there in less than a minute. Delia started to sweat a little. For the first time, she felt how heavy the coat weighed on her shoulders. Somehow, despite the fact that it was a faux-fur coat, she'd never noticed its heft before.

"Hang on, just technical difficulties," the photog-rapher said. "We're rebooting it. Let's try that again."

Then he snapped several more pics of her, the flash strobing at her. Delia tried several different poses this time, moving in rhythm with the camera. She wasn't sure how she knew to do that. It was almost like the coat took over and made her strike those poses.

Wow, I could get used to this, she thought, pursing her lips and smiling at the camera. But then the photographer lowered the lens and stared at the display in dismay.

"Uh, what's wrong?" Delia asked.

"I don't know," he said. "It's so strange. This has never happened before."

He approached Delia and showed her the pictures that he'd just snapped of her, flipping through them. She stared at them on the camera's display, then flinched back in alarm.

"What the—?" she exclaimed.

In every picture, her face looked blank and expressionless, even though she was sure that she had been smiling. Her lips still tingled from holding them in a wide smile for that long.

"Let's try one more time," he said, sounding a bit shaken. "Now *smile*!"

This time, Delia made sure to smile big and wide, until her lips ached and her cheeks hurt. She could feel sweat dripping down her neck. These *had* to work.

Flash. Flash. Flash.

But again, when they viewed the pictures, Delia's face looked vacant and lifeless. Her lips were frozen. Her eyes empty. She almost looked like…a plastic doll.

"Your camera…it must be broken…" she said, backing away in alarm.

"All the other pictures came out fine," said the photographer, showing her the other portraits he'd snapped that day of her classmates. Each student

smiled cheerfully, full of expression. Face after face. Smile after smile. Then—

Delia's blank, creepy stare in picture after picture.

All the kids were still gawking at her, wondering what the holdup was. She could hear their heated whispers.

What's wrong? Grant mouthed, catching her eye. *You okay?*

Delia wasn't okay. She was totally freaked out, but she didn't want Harper and her friends to know how hideous her school pictures were.

She needed them to like her, and that meant she had to look perfect.

"Want to try again?" the photographer said, sounding exasperated. He gestured to his assistant, then raised his camera. "Can you try to actually smile this time?"

But Delia knew that she *had* been smiling the whole time, just for some reason the camera didn't register it.

Suddenly she felt like crying. This wasn't how school picture day was supposed to go. Her heart started to race, and cold sweat broke out on her forehead. Harper was watching her closely with a frown on her face. She whispered to Charlotte and Ella, who giggled.

The photographer raised his camera, but Delia couldn't stand to take another terrible picture where her face looked frozen, like a deer in the headlights.

Or worse, some kind of plastic doll.

"Sorry…" she said, turning and bolting out of the auditorium.

She ran down the empty halls, but the coat felt like it was choking her. It squeezed her body like a tourniquet and made running harder. Her limbs fought to move inside its iron grip. She struggled against it and burst outside into the school parking lot.

Even though it was cold, the midday sun glared down at her, making her sweat even more in the heavy coat. Her breath came in short gasps. The coat clung to her, but instead of making her feel good, it felt heavy.

She struggled to understand what had happened back there. Why did her face come out blank, even though she was sure she was smiling in every pic?

Vroooooom.

Suddenly a bloodred antique car raced through the school parking lot straight for her. The headlights were on full blast, making it impossible to see the driver's face. But she heard a strange cackling laugh, like the one

from her nightmare. Or, if she was being honest with herself, the one from the alley on the day she'd taken the coat.

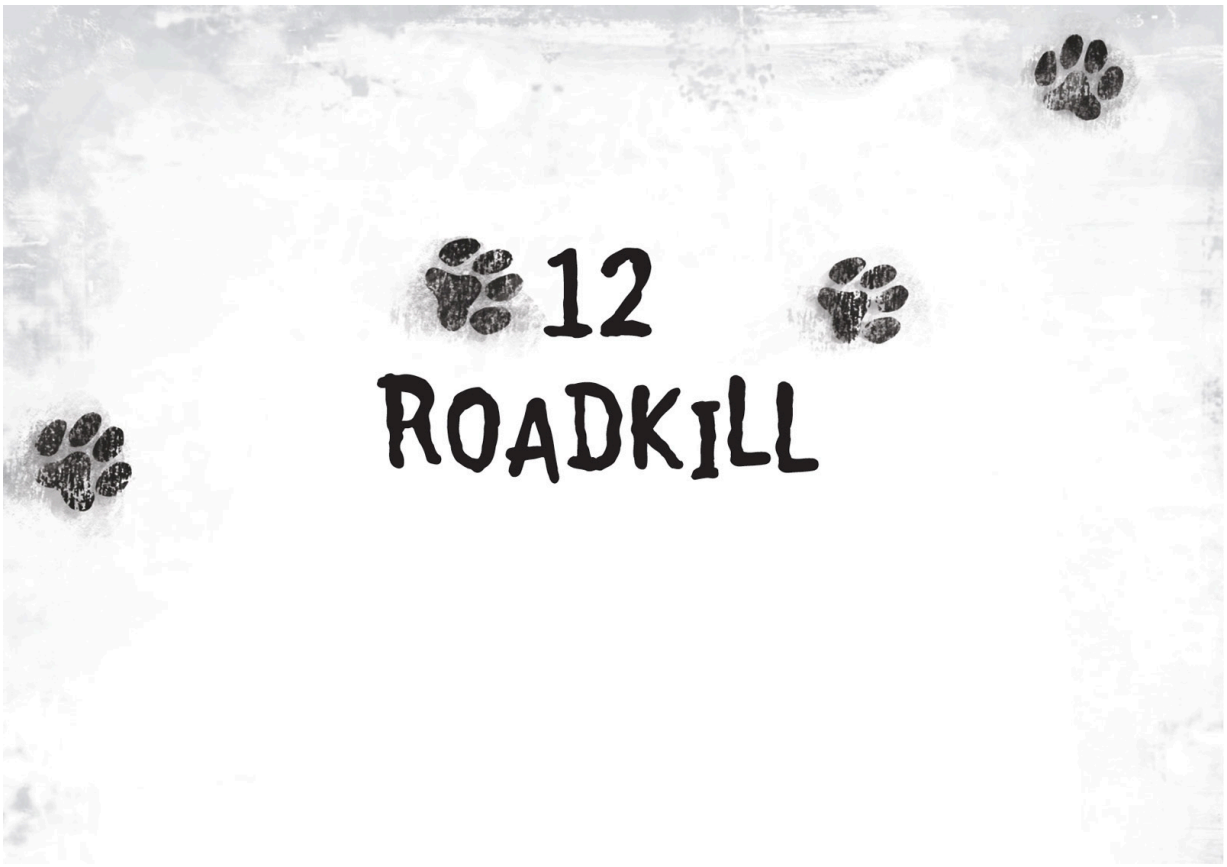
"Darling, you're not worthy of my couture!" a voice with a lilting accent yelled at her from the driver's-side window.

Delia tried to move out of the way, but the coat tightened and held her in place, almost like it wanted her to get run over. She couldn't move. The car accelerated even faster, the tires squealing on the asphalt and kicking up dust. Delia smelled the acrid burn of exhaust.

But she was frozen.

"No! Noooooo—"

She screamed as the car barreled right for her.



12 ROADKILL

The car raced toward Delia.

She stood frozen in place. The headlights blinded her. Her body wouldn't move. The coat held her tight, restricting her movement. The driver revved the engine, accelerating.

"Nooooo!" Delia screamed, unable to even raise her hands to protect her face—they were locked at her sides, encased in the coat and stuck in place. What was happening? *How* was it happening?

She braced herself for the impact, fully expecting that it would kill her, when suddenly someone slammed into her, pushing her out of the way. It was Grant. She was processing the fact that he'd saved her as they crashed to the pavement together, a tangle of arms and legs. The car sped past, nearly clipping Delia's boots. It left Delia and Grant lying there in a cloud of dust and debris.

The driver honked maniacally, then zoomed out of the parking lot, vanishing down the road with a squeal of rubber. Delia spotted the name of

the car model on the back of the trunk: *Panther DeVille.*

She locked eyes with Grant. He was breathing hard and clutching his elbow. There was a hole in his hoodie and a scrape on his arm, but he looked okay otherwise.

"Wow, that was close," he said in a shaky voice.

"Um, yeah. You literally just saved my life."

"I guess," he said modestly. "Anyone would do the same." He shook his arm out and stood up, brushing himself off. Delia scrambled to her feet as well, noticing his hands were skinned and caked with gravel.

"Are you kidding? That was total superhero stuff! Thank you!"

Grant blushed. "It was pretty cool, wasn't it?"

Delia gave him a wan smile, feeling queasy suddenly.

"Hey, are you okay?" Grant asked.

"Ummm…I don't know." Her limbs were tingly from being held in place, but they'd finally become unstuck. She didn't understand what had just happened. Had she frozen up in fear, or was it something more? It had felt as if the coat was holding her prisoner, keeping her from jumping out of the way.

But that was impossible.

"Maybe you should sit." Grant gestured at the curb along the sidewalk, and Delia sat down heavily. "Jeez, talk about major road rage," he said, looking in the direction the car had driven off. "We should report the driver. Did you see the plates?"

Delia shook her head, following his gaze.

"I couldn't see the driver either," she told him. "The headlights blinded me. But I did see the name of the car. It was a Panther DeVille. And it was red and looked kind of antique, too."

"Well, you should at least tell the school," he said. "You could've been killed."

"I have no idea why she wanted to run me over…" Delia started, but then she remembered the cackling laughter and what the driver had yelled at her.

"I thought you didn't see the driver."

"I didn't."

"So how do you know it was a she?" he asked.

Darling, you're not worthy of my couture!

Because she'd heard that voice. Could that really be why? Was whoever behind the wheel after her coat? But nobody knew that she'd taken the coat from the alley. She'd been completely alone when she'd done it. And even if someone somehow did see her, how would they know that she would be in the school parking lot at this specific time? Even Delia hadn't known that she would be out here.

Delia shuddered, despite the warmth of the coat. The driver had said it was "my couture." If this was actually the famous Cruella Coat, that meant it had once belonged to the mysterious designer herself. But nobody knew if she had even been a real person. Plus, even if she *was* a real person, she would be long dead.

None of this made any sense.

"Uh, what were you doing out here anyway?" Delia asked, choosing to ignore his last question.

"Well, you looked pretty upset after getting your picture taken," Grant said. "I saw you run out of the auditorium. So I decided to check on you. I didn't think it would be a superhero moment."

"Thank you," she said. "If you hadn't come after me, I'd be…" She trailed off.

Their eyes met, but then she looked away. This day had started out strange and just gotten stranger. First the numbness when she'd woken up, then her face looking blank and plastic in all her school photos, then the near accident and the fact that the coat had seemed to *want* her to get run over.

And had she *really* heard that voice shouting about her couture?

What if someone was really after her because of the coat? She could have been killed—and gotten Grant killed, too. She started to back away from him, feeling panicked. She didn't want to drag him further into this mess, not when it was her fault. She was the one who'd taken the coat. She would have to figure out what was happening on her own.

I don't want anyone else to get hurt.

"Look…Thanks for saving me…" Delia stammered. "But I've really gotta go."

It was the middle of the day, and she was technically skipping school, but she didn't care. She couldn't face Harper and her friends being excited about how great their pictures had come out, or having to explain what went wrong or why she'd run from the school. She had to get out of there.

She turned and fled down the road, running for the train station.

* * *

The train sped by the rooftops, zipping through the cityscape. Lulled by the *clickety-clack*, Delia watched the buildings pass by the window in a rush, as familiar to her as the backs of her hands. But something was still bugging her.

Climbing the stairs to the elevated platform had been harder than usual. Her muscles had felt heavy and her joints almost numb, and it wasn't from the cold wind hitting the platform. She'd felt something similar when she'd woken up that morning, but that had cleared up quickly. Was something wrong with her, though? Did she need to see a doctor?

Or was it…somehow…the coat?

Delia glanced down at her hands, nestled against the soft faux fur of the coat. They appeared smoother than normal. She curled and flexed her fingers, and they tingled ominously. Feeling a twinge of worry, she held both hands up to her face and peered closer.

Was it her imagination—or did her fingers look kind of…*plastic*?

Suddenly her phone pinged, startling her.

It was an alert from PicPerfect. Delia hadn't checked her profile since… when? Since before the car incident. She hadn't gone that long without clicking on PicPerfect in ages. She unlocked her phone.

Keep up your streak—post a selfie.

The alert message flashed at her. She felt panicked as she clicked on her profile. Had her ranking dropped?

Relief rushed through her when she saw that her top ranking at Gilded Crest was still intact. But it wouldn't stay that way if she didn't keep posting. Users had to keep posting selfies and giving their followers fresh content to stay on top. That was the number-one rule on PicPerfect.

Well, that and post #perfect selfies.

Automatically, without even thinking, she held her phone out and aimed the camera lens at her face, tilting her neck and smiling. Her arms felt a bit tingly, but nothing alarming. At least she could move them.

Click.

The selfie came out perfect. She was even smiling in it. Delia's heart instantly felt lighter. Clearly, the situation with the school pictures was just a crazy fluke—probably a technical glitch with the photographer's camera. Nothing more.

Delia layered in hashtags—#ElTrain #TrainSelfie #HouseofDeVil #NaturalLook—and hit POST. She watched as the selfie went live on the app. Heart emojis started to flood into the comments, and Delia felt a thrill each time a new one popped up.

But then something shifted. The selfie began to change, right in front of her eyes. White hair began to sprout out of one side of her head, while black hair sprouted out of the other.

Heart pounding, Delia refreshed the feed.

The hair was still there, just a bit longer. *Refresh.* Her part moved to the center of her forehead, dividing the hair perfectly in half—one side black, one side white. *Refresh.* Her lips turned bright red.

"What the—?"

She hit REFRESH one more time. She couldn't seem to stop herself. This time her eyes looked odd. They looked almost as if they were swirling with strange yellow light.

Delia almost dropped her phone.

Suddenly little red devil emojis started to flood the comments and fill the screen, pushing her post down in the rankings. There were fewer and fewer hearts and more and more devils.

"No! *No!*" Delia cried aloud.

She tried to block the accounts that were posting the devils, but she couldn't stop them fast enough. For each account she unfriended, five more devils popped into the comments. She had too many followers, many from her viral post. The little red devil faces seemed to grin at her from her screen, as if mocking her hideous appearance.

And how could they not? She looked like some kind of horror-movie clown. Who was doing this to her picture? Had somebody hacked her account?

Suddenly her phone pinged with a new DM.

With shaky fingers, Delia clicked on the private message, hoping that it might provide some answers. But her stomach flipped when she saw the user's name on the account.

It was from—

The Devil Woman

The profile pic showed a red devil face. Delia gasped when she saw it. Quickly, she scanned the message. The words jumped out, making her heart thump against her chest.

Having fun with my coat, darling?

Suddenly a cackling laugh echoed through the train.

Heart in her throat, Delia glanced around the train car—but it was empty, aside from a few commuters with their heads buried in their phones. None of them were cackling at her. It was as if they hadn't even heard the laughter.

Where did it come from?

Her eyes darted back to her phone, and that red devil face staring back at her from the profile pic. How did this random user know about her coat?

A horrible mixture of guilt and terror crashed through Delia like a blast of bitter wind. Somebody who worked for the House of De Vil store must have seen her take it. Delia hadn't noticed any security cameras back there, but what if they were just hidden really well? Someone definitely could have caught her transgression on video and might now be using their knowledge of what she'd done to mess with her. She glanced down at the luxurious black-and-white coat draped over her body. Suddenly it didn't feel so great to be wearing it.

Delia had wanted the House of De Vil coat more than anything, but now she wished she could just get rid of it. All she wanted was for everything to go back to normal, even if it meant not being as popular on PicPerfect anymore. She remembered how she'd initially promised herself that she would return the coat after a few days. But then everything had been going so great, she had decided to keep it.

Clearly that had been a big mistake. Delia swallowed hard against the lump in her throat.

At the next stop, Delia sprang up from her seat and hopped off the train. She was close to the shopping district now. She would return the coat to

House of De Vil and end this mess once and for all. Harper would probably never speak to her again, but she would just have to deal.

It was time to make this right.

Delia bounded down Michigan Avenue, passing the crowded House of De Vil flagship store on her way to the alley behind it. The store was, of course, packed with shoppers. She paused in front of the windows, suddenly getting the spine-tingling feeling that someone was watching her. She glanced across the street.

Idling at a metered spot was the red Panther DeVille.

Delia's blood went cold. Had the car followed her here? Was the driver stalking her?

Terrified, Delia cut around the corner to the back alley where she had first discovered the coat. She had to get rid of it, and now. A row of mannequins was lined up by the dumpster. They were each posed in glam House of De Vil clothes and boots. Clearly this was where they staged the mannequins, dressing them for the display booths and windows. Maybe that was why the coat had been out in the alley—because they were getting it ready for the store's display.

Delia gulped. It was official. The coat wasn't abandoned. She had stolen it.

Delia glanced around, but there was no one in sight. The alley was deserted. She approached the last mannequin in the row. This one hadn't been dressed yet. Its naked plastic body looked creepy next to the fully dressed ones.

Delia hesitated for a moment, feeling strangely possessive of the coat, and ran her fingers through the soft faux fur. Almost like it had a mind of its own, the coat gripped her limbs tighter, like it didn't want her to get rid of it. Her arms started to feel tingly again. Suddenly she remembered what had brought her back here.

I have to return it, she told herself forcefully. *It's the right thing to do.*

And if it made all these creepy things stop happening to her, all the better. Before she could second-guess herself, Delia stripped off the coat, struggling to peel it from her limbs. The coat clung to her like a second skin.

It didn't want to let her go.

Finally, with a desperate grunt of effort, she tore off the coat, panting for breath. She stared at the garment in horror. Why was it so hard to take it

off? Then she dug through her bag for paper and a pen and scribbled out a quick apology note:

Sorry I took the coat.

She stuck the note in the pocket of the coat and carefully draped it over the mannequin.

"Good riddance," Delia whispered, and turned away.

Instantly, she felt better—lighter and freer—without the heavy coat weighing her down and restricting her movements. Delia flexed her arms, bending her elbows. They no longer felt tingly. She could move freely again. Also, that strange plastic sheen on her skin was gone.

A cold wind hit her, whipping off the lake. Delia shivered. She wrapped her arms around herself and walked briskly up the alley, needing to get home before she froze to death. The sun would set soon, making it worse.

Vroom.

Delia glanced around, feeling a stab of fear. But there were no cars in the alley. That was weird. She kept walking, picking up her pace—

Vroom.

Delia froze. Two headlights snapped on in front of her, almost blinding her. She narrowed her eyes, trying to make out the car, even though she was sure she knew what she would see. And she was right. It was the red Panther DeVille.

Delia squinted over the glare of the headlights. She could just make out the silhouette of a woman with red lipstick and spiky hair.

Suddenly a cackling laugh emanated from the car. It echoed down the alley.

How had the car gotten back here? Had it followed her down the alley?

Delia backed away in terror. "I'm sorry…. I gave your coat back," she shouted to the driver, struggling to be heard over the engine's roar. "Please! Please leave me alone—"

Vroom. Vroom. Vroom.

The woman was revving the engine again and again, taunting her, purposely drowning out her voice.

Delia had to run. But there was nowhere to go. The alley was just wide enough for one vehicle to get through at a time. If the driver floored the gas, Delia was toast.

Then the driver clicked on the brights. Delia's eyes stung horribly and she squeezed them shut, bending at the waist against the pain. The car was about to come at her. She could feel it. There was nothing she could do. Even without the coat weighing her down, she was frozen in fear.

But then, suddenly, silence. Carefully, Delia opened her eyes. The car was gone.

The alley was dark.

She was the only person in sight.

But no. That was impossible. Cars couldn't just disappear like that.

Another blast of cold wind hit Delia square in the chest, knocking the air out of her lungs and snapping her to attention. Delia couldn't explain what had just happened, but she was not wasting another second. She turned and bolted down Michigan Avenue, dodging the shoppers laden with hefty designer bags, and careened down the sidewalk toward the train.

I gave the coat back, she thought in desperation as she climbed the steps to the El. *Just please leave me alone.*

The only answer was the cold wind hitting the elevated platform with a mournful *whoosh*. Standing there, shivering as she waited for the train, Delia was scared and lost and unsure. When she'd found the coat, it had made her feel like she was beautiful and popular. Tomorrow, everything would be different. But how?

Without the coat, who was she?

13 FASHIONISTA

Delia arrived at her stop, still relieved to be rid of the coat despite the deep chill that had set into her limbs from the subzero wind blasting the elevated train platform.

But strangely, as she wound her way through her tree-lined Old Town neighborhood filled with brownstones, cutting home from the Brown Line stop, she found herself feeling emptier and emptier. The loss of the coat started to haunt her. It almost felt like she'd lost a limb. She couldn't believe how much she could miss something that wasn't even alive—and that she'd very much wanted to be free of.

What would happen to her PicPerfect ranking? And what about her new friends at Gilded Crest when she showed up without the coat? Would Harper and the Glam Posse still like her? Would they even talk to her?

Not to mention, she'd also have to come up with some story for her mother to explain how she had lost her brand-new coat. She braced herself

for a lecture about *taking better care of her things* and how *money doesn't grow on trees*.

Suddenly she wanted to go back for the coat.

But that was crazy.

That coat almost got me killed, she reminded herself with a shudder.

Looking fashionable was not worth dying for, no matter how many followers and likes she got on PicPerfect. So why did she feel so anxious? Why was she so convinced she *needed* to turn around and go back?

* * *

Delia finally arrived at her doorstep, but the door was flung open wide before she could even grab the knob.

A very irate Mrs. Smith greeted her. "What were you thinking running out in this weather without a coat? You're gonna catch a cold."

"Uh, how did you know I didn't have my coat?" Delia asked.

Mrs. Smith didn't answer. She just thrust a coat at her: *the House of De Vil coat*—the one Delia had just draped over a mannequin outside the store. Delia gasped and backed away in shock.

"Wh-where did you get that?" Delia said.

This could not be happening. How had the coat gotten back to her house? All the way from Michigan Avenue? And into Mrs. Smith's arms?

"I decided to let the pups run around the house a bit," Mrs. Smith said with a roll of her eyes. "Too cold to let the wee little ones outside. Little Radar ran into your room—and when I burst in, the coat was on your bed!"

"That coat…was on my bed?" Delia repeated, numb from shock.

"Young lady, what were you thinking?" Mrs. Smith said. "Look, I won't tell your mother—it'll be our little secret. But don't go running off without a coat, not this time of year. The last thing you need is to get sick and miss school, especially when you just started at Gilded Crest. You don't want to fall behind, do you?"

"Uh, right…I'm so sorry," Delia said, struggling to understand what was happening. It was like she couldn't get rid of the stupid coat. Like it was…haunting her.

Oblivious, Mrs. Smith shoved the coat at Delia, who struggled to grab hold of it. Then her landlady sashayed into the kitchen, where the puppies

were yipping for their supper and climbing around in their pen.

"You're just lucky I caught little Radar," Mrs. Smith said. "He was squatting on the coat to…*you know what*. Last time I let them have free rein of my house." Mrs. Smith pulled the milk from the fridge. "You must be frozen, dear. Want some hot cocoa to warm you up?"

Delia forced a smile. "Yes, that would be great."

While Mrs. Smith busied herself making the cocoa, and the house filled with the warm, sweet, rich, buttery aroma of chocolate, Delia snuck out the back door with the coat.

The wind hit her full blast, but she didn't care. She stared at the coat in disgust.

"I'm done with you," she muttered to it. "Don't you dare come back again!"

With that, she stuffed it into their garbage bin, pushing it down and shutting the lid. *Thud.* Then she snuck back inside. Mrs. Smith soon reappeared from the kitchen, handing her a steaming mug of hot cocoa. Delia accepted it gratefully. It was already warming her up.

"Thanks so much! I'm gonna go do my homework," she said, grabbing her backpack and heading upstairs. "Busy day at school!"

It was just an excuse. She was simply exhausted from everything she'd been through that day. But when she returned to her room, thrusting open the door—

The coat was on her bed.

Delia gasped, tears instantly prickling her eyes. "No. That's impossible…." But there was no denying it. The coat was somehow following her.

But how? Was she losing her mind?

Nobody else was home, besides her and Mrs. Smith and the puppies. And she was pretty sure Radar hadn't dragged the coat out of the trash and up to her bed.

Why couldn't she get rid of it? Why did it keep coming back?

Her reflection caught her eye in the mirror. She turned, shocked at what she saw. Her face looked…plastic.

Delia tried to smile, straining to make her lips move and stretch her cheeks. But her expression remained…expressionless. Her lips wouldn't move. Her eyes looked dead.

Her reflection looked like a mannequin.

What was happening to her?

That's when it hit her. The strange account she had blocked on PicPerfect. The one with the mannequin profile picture. Delia whipped out her phone, not even bothering to check her ranking for once, and flipped through the blocked accounts. She zeroed in on the mannequin profile —"Fashion Addict." The creepy plastic face in the pic stared back at her.

With a deep breath, she clicked UNBLOCK.

A warning message flashed on her screen.

Are you sure you want to unblock this user?

It glared at her.

Delia didn't feel sure. But she clicked OKAY anyway.

The message exchange popped back up. She scanned the messages, reading the last one that the user sent to her before she blocked their account.

From Fashion Addict:
Beware of the Devil Woman.

Delia's heart beat faster as she stared at it. A cold sweat broke out over her body. But she forced herself to type a message back.

Who is she? And what do you mean?
What happened to your friend?

She hit RETURN, sending the DM, then collapsed into bed, keeping her eyes on the screen for a reply. But none came.

Before long, Delia's eyes grew heavy. This day had been too much. She was so exhausted. Maybe if she just closed her eyes for a little while, she could face her homework—and whatever was going on with the coat.

Without even changing her clothes, Delia fell asleep. It was a restless sleep, filled with violent nightmares about mannequins and speeding cars and a cackling woman with horrible hair. Delia tossed and turned until a sound broke through.

Yip! Yip! Yip!

She bolted awake. It was the puppies.

Delia blinked at her dark room. The hot cocoa by her bedside remained untouched—it had turned to thick sludge. She was lying on top of the coat, fully clothed.

Yip! Yip! Yip!

The puppies were screaming for help. She jumped out of bed and stumbled into the hall, still foggy from sleep. The house was dark. It was late, but the night-light shone bright. Her legs felt tingly and a bit numb, but she didn't have time to worry about that right now.

The puppies sounded like they were in trouble.

Muddy paw prints marred the kitchen floorboards, and when she peered into the pen, the puppies were gone.

The pen was empty. Mud was splashed all over the kitchen. She could make out footprints from what looked like two large men's boots along with the tiny paw prints.

Suddenly a dark shadow rose up behind her. The hands with their long, sharp nails reached out and grabbed her. The razor-sharp claws dug into her flesh.

Delia thrashed about, trying to free herself from the hands. But it was no use. They squeezed tighter. The shadow's eyes lit up with crazy, swirling yellow light. They stared down at Delia.

A cackle cut through the house. Then a voice rang out.

"You let those filthy mongrels crawl all over *my* coat! How dare you?!"

14 PLASTIC GIRL

Delia woke up with a start, feeling like she was being strangled.

She tried to scream, but nothing came out. She clawed at her neck, gasping for breath, but her arms were heavy and creaky and she could barely move them. The coat was wrapped around her throat, suffocating her in her sleep.

“No, get off me!” she gasped, and finally tore the coat off her neck. She flung it to the ground, where it landed in a pile of faux fur. Her arms flopped down and hung limp in her lap.

Delia stared at the coat in horror. It was like she couldn’t get away from it, no matter how hard she tried. Not even in her sleep. How had it wound up wrapped around her neck?

It took a minute for her to catch her breath. Light was streaming in through her window. It was morning. Time for school. Snowflakes drifted down, powdering the streets. Her eyes darted to the coat. She’d have to

wear it. It was the only coat she had. She'd donated her old coat to the thrift store and left the puffer coat that she bought with her gift card on the mannequin at House of De Vil.

If she left it at home, Mrs. Smith would find it and be angry. Or worse, it would just follow her to school. She shuddered, not wanting to put the coat on again, but feeling trapped.

Delia flipped her phone on. After yesterday's disastrous post, her PicPerfect ranking was way down.

Suddenly her phone buzzed with a new DM…from Fashion Addict. The mannequin account. The one that she'd unblocked yesterday before bed.

Her heart thudded harder as she clicked OPEN. Her eyes scanned the message.

From Fashion Addict:

Once upon a time, my best friend just wanted to be fashionable and popular. All she wanted in the world was a House of De Vil coat. I still don't know how my friend got the Cruella Coat. She would never tell me. She said it was a big secret.

At first, it was great. She loved the coat and almost never took it off. She even slept in it. Her skin started to look perfect. All her selfies came out flawless. Her ranking on PicPerfect soared…but then the coat started to change her.

Her skin looked plastic. Her limbs would barely move. They became stiff and rigid, so it was hard for her to walk. It got to the point where I could barely recognize my friend anymore. Eventually, she couldn't even leave her house.

Then one day she vanished—along with the coat. The police searched for her, but all they found were muddy boot prints leading through her front door.

I started messaging PicPerfect accounts that follow House of De Vil to warn them! Stay away from the Devil Woman! Her fashion

line is cursed!

Delia stared at the message in shock, then quickly shut her phone. Her heart was hammering. Sweat broke out on her forehead. It was probably a hoax. Somebody playing a trick on her. Like an urban legend. Those were all over the internet.

She remembered Grant talking about how her friends on PicPerfect were really just strangers. You didn't know who they were in real life, nor could you trust them.

Delia hit BLOCK again, shunning the account so no more messages could come through. She struggled to steady her racing heart, but some details from the story were impossible to ignore.

She glanced down at her hands with their plastic sheen. She bent her elbows, but they felt tingly and stiff. Above all, the detail about the muddy boot prints was super spooky. In her nightmare about the stolen puppies, she had seen muddy boot prints in her kitchen.

Was that some kind of sign?

"Delia! It's getting late! Are you ready for school?" her mother called up the stairs.

"Almost," Delia called back in a croaking voice. She had no choice. She quickly changed her clothes and slipped on the coat, feeling like it weighed a hundred pounds. She'd have to figure out a way to get rid of the coat for real this time. But how?

* * *

Delia arrived at Gilded Crest and scanned the hall for Harper and her Glam Posse. They were clustered by Harper's locker, twirling their hair and wearing their House of De Vil boots.

"Hey, Harper," Delia said, making a beeline for her, grateful for some normalcy. Talking to her friends would cheer her up. Maybe they could even help her figure out what to do about the coat.

"Uh, like, do we know you?" Harper said, giving her a strange look, like she didn't recognize her. She exchanged glances with Charlotte and Ella, who also squinted at Delia.

"Yeah, who are you again?" Ella said with a frown.

“Right, we don’t talk to strangers,” Charlotte added, whipping her hair around.

With a jolt, Delia remembered the story about the girl’s friend and how the coat changed her appearance. *It got to the point where I could barely recognize my friend anymore.*

Was that what was happening to her?

“Hey, wait up!” Delia said, waving at the girls as they passed her by. “It’s me…Delia? Don’t you recognize me? We’re friends! We even posted selfies on PicPerfect together?”

Harper’s eyes struggled to focus on her, then they widened.

“Delia?” Harper said uncertainly. “Oh my gosh. You look so… different.”

Delia breathed a sigh of relief. “Oh, thank you! Yes, it’s me! It’s this coat! It must be cursed or something. It’s somehow changing my appearance. I have to get rid of it—”

Harper frowned. “Get rid of it? What do you mean?”

“Yeah, what are you even talking about?” Ella said, stifling a snicker. “Why would you want to get rid of a House of De Vil original? I’d give anything to get my hands on a Cruella Coat!”

“Exactly! Why are you acting so bonkers?” Charlotte added with a smirk.

The Glam Posse burst out laughing.

“She thinks the coat is *cursed*. That’s hilarious.” Harper snickered. Her eyes fixed on Delia, then narrowed. “Maybe you’re just not cool enough to pull off House of De Vil.”

Delia felt her cheeks flame red hot. She had thought these were her friends. But now when she needed help, they were laughing at her. Suddenly she realized just how right Grant was about these girls. He said they were just using her for her PicPerfect ranking, and now that was abundantly clear.

Suddenly a wonderful, wicked idea struck Delia. She needed to get rid of the coat, didn’t she?

“Maybe you’re right, Harper. Maybe I’m not cool enough. But you clearly are. And if you want it so much, then you can have it!”

“Wait, what do you mean?” Harper said. “You’re giving that coat away?”

“Yup.” Delia nodded. “That’s exactly what I’m doing.”

She felt slightly off-kilter. Just a few days ago, Delia would have done anything to get a House of De Vil coat. Now all she wanted was to get rid of it. She was certain that the coat was cursed…but Harper was so awful. If anyone deserved a cursed coat, it was her.

"Great. Then hand it over," Harper said, calling her bluff.

She held out her arms. Relief washed over Delia. She was sure this would work. If she gave the coat to someone else, then it would stick to the new owner, and she'd be rid of it for sure. Delia gripped the sleeves, trying to shrug them off her shoulders, but the coat clung to her. It tightened around her body like a vise. The more she struggled, the tighter it cinched.

It didn't want to let her go.

Delia struggled with the coat, doing everything she could think of to try to wrench it off her body, but it wouldn't release her. She ended up red-faced, out of breath, looking ridiculous…and still unable to take it off.

Harper and her friends watched the pitiful performance with wide, shocked eyes. Then they burst out laughing again.

"Wow, she really is bonkers!" Harper said. "Come on, girls. Let's get out of here!"

They marched off, leaving Delia sweating in her coat.

This was not good. Delia bolted for the bathroom, but her joints felt even more tingly and stiff now. She ended up half running and half hobbling. She burst into the bathroom and staggered up to the sinks, staring at her reflection in the mirror.

Her gasp filled the small room.

Her face didn't look like her face at all—it looked like a plastic doll face. Her skin was smooth and varnished. Her eyes looked wide and blank. Her lips were frozen in a pout.

No, not a plastic doll.

She looked like a mannequin.

Like the ones displayed in the fancy storefronts on Michigan Avenue. The coat hugged her body, mocking her. No wonder Harper and her friends hadn't recognized her at first.

She backed away from her reflection in a panic.

"You did this to me…" Delia whispered, tearing at the coat in horror.

But it clung to her. It still wouldn't come off. Her heart hammered against her rib cage. Her mind raced, trying to think of anyone who could help her.

Only one person leapt to mind.

Grant.

Delia rushed from the bathroom and scanned the hall. She spotted him by his locker. He had his old hoodie pulled up over his hair and was nodding to some beat that only he could hear.

She hurried up to him. “Grant…I’m so sorry…but I need your help,” she stammered, having to force her stiff lips to even form the words. They came out raspy and thick.

He slid out his earbuds and frowned at her face.

“Uh, hello?” he said, blinking at her in confusion.

He didn’t recognize her.

“It’s me…. It’s Delia…. Please say you know me!” she rasped in desperation, trying to force expression into her features. “Listen, I need your help. I don’t know who else to turn to….”

He studied her face, almost like he was struggling to see beneath her plastic skin. He tilted his head and peered deep into her eyes, then startled.

“Delia…what happened to you?” he exclaimed.

“Oh, thank you!” she gasped, hugging him before she could stop herself, her stiff limbs barely able to grip him. “You recognize me!”

“Yeah, but what happened?” he said in alarm. “You look kind of…”

She pulled back and met his eyes, feeling ashamed. She forced the word out.

“Plastic?”

15
CRUELLA DE VIL

Grant led Delia into his apartment after school, waving to his mom on the way in. She brightened when she saw him—and especially when her eyes landed on Delia. “Well, hello there!”

“Hey, Mom, this is Delia,” Grant said. “My new friend from school.”

“Very nice to meet you,” Grant’s mother said, wiping her hands on a dish towel as she stepped out of the kitchen. Something was burbling on the stove, and the delicious scent of it made Delia’s stomach grumble. “He calls me Mom, of course. But you can call me Claudia.”

“Nice to meet you, too!” Delia said, but then Claudia’s brow knit and Grant grabbed Delia’s arm. It felt stiff and plastic in his grasp as he turned her away from his mother. Delia’s heart caught as she realized he didn’t want his mom to get too close a look at her. It must have been getting worse. She was turning more and more plastic by the second.

“Do you two want some snacks?” Claudia offered.

“Actually, we’ve got a lot of homework,” Grant said. “We should probably just get started.”

“Of course. I’ll bring you something to eat in a bit. It’ll help you focus,” his mom said with a knowing smile. Her eyes landed on Delia’s heavy faux-fur coat. “Do you want me to hang that up for you?” she asked.

Delia hesitated. As if sensing that she might try to remove it, the coat tightened around her torso, squeezing her. After the whole mortifying hallway struggle at school, she knew that she couldn’t take it off, and didn’t want his mother to witness her struggling with it.

“Uh, no thanks,” she said quickly.

“She’s always cold,” Grant added with a forced chuckle. “We’ll be in my room.”

Grant quickly led Delia down the carpeted hall. His family lived in a modest but homey apartment in Old Town. It was one floor, unlike Delia’s town house, and newer construction. But sunlight streamed through the many windows, giving it a cheery vibe.

Delia plopped down in Grant’s desk chair and relaxed slightly. Something about Grant made her feel better. Maybe it was just having a friend. A *real* friend who didn’t make fun of her on PicPerfect or drop her at the first sign of trouble.

Her eyes swept over his room. Vinyl-record covers were affixed to the walls. A fluorescent green lava lamp sat next to the bed on a little table. A laptop sat on the desk, with an old record player next to it. Stacked against the wall were crates and crates of vinyl. Two vintage speakers bookended the wooden desk, which looked like it came from Replay Vintage. In fact, a lot of the furniture in their apartment looked that way.

But Delia didn’t mind. Somehow, it made the place feel cozy—like everything had a history, but one where people had cared for the items, then passed them on when it was time.

“Your room is really cool,” Delia commented. None of her friends had rooms that looked anything like this. “And look how many records you have!”

“Wanna hear one?” he asked, clearly excited to play them for her.

She nodded eagerly. Her neck felt stiff and tingly, but she tried to ignore it. He leaned past her and hit a button on the record player. The black vinyl started spinning. Then he dropped the needle. A sultry voice echoed out of the speakers over melodic jazz music.

“Music always makes me feel better,” he said, sitting down on the edge of his bed.

Delia listened to the music, letting it carry her mind away on a symphonic ride. It was so different from anything she’d ever heard. It warmed her ears and her brain. Even her body felt less stiff.

It was the most human she’d felt in days.

“I love this song,” she told him.

“Really?” Grant said, looking thrilled. “This is jazz, my favorite style of music. But it’s usually a bit of an acquired taste. Not a lot of kids our age listen to it anymore.”

“Is this him?” Delia asked. “Ol’ Blue Eyes? The one you told me about?”

“Sure is…What do you think?”

Grant waited for her answer while she searched for the proper words to describe the indescribable way the music made her feel. He seemed nervous almost—like he cared.

“His voice sounds like…” she started, closing her eyes to listen. “Butter.”

Grant snorted a laugh and then his eyes widened. “You’re a genius. It does!”

“I love it,” Delia said. “I’ve never heard anything like it.”

Delia sat forward and automatically tried to remove her coat, but it tightened around her and, just like that, the bubble of contentment around her burst. Grant spotted the look on her face and turned more serious.

“What’s going on?” he said. “Start from the beginning. Tell me everything.”

She looked down and chewed her lip, feeling a surge of doubt. “You’re not gonna believe me. Honestly, I wouldn’t believe me.”

“Go ahead,” he said. “Try me.”

Delia took a deep breath, and it all spilled out. The more she talked about it, the less stiff her mouth felt, as if confessing helped her get better.

She told him everything. About finding the coat in the alley outside the House of De Vil store and taking it, even though she knew it was wrong. How it was great at first—her physical transformation. Her skin clearing up. Her hair looking sleek and healthy. Every selfie coming out perfect. How Harper and her friends actually liked her, and her PicPerfect ranking soared.

Then how it all started to backfire. The horrible nightmares. The car trying to run her over and stalking her. How her limbs got tingly and stiff. She held out her hands for him to see.

"I think it's turning me into a…mannequin."

"No way," he said, studying her plastic-y skin. "But how is that possible?"

Delia shook her head. "I don't know, but look at this." She showed him the DMs from the Fashion Addict account on PicPerfect. "I can't explain it, but I think the coat is cursed."

He frowned at the messages. "That does sound…impossible."

She turned away. "Ugh, I knew you wouldn't believe me—"

"You didn't let me finish," he cut her off. "But that doesn't mean I don't believe you. I can see how you're changing. Not to mention, I did save you from that out-of-control driver."

"Also, there's more," she went on, wanting to cry—trying to, even—but her eyes felt frozen. They couldn't form tears. Delia stood up in a panic, but it took longer than it should have for her to rise out of her chair. "Oh no. Oh *no*!"

"What…what is it?" Grant asked in a worried voice.

She turned to the mirror on the back of his bedroom door and stared at her face. She looked like one of the old-fashioned dolls she used to play with when she was little.

"It's getting worse," she said, pulling at the corner of her eyes, trying to make them move. "I can't even cry anymore. What is happening to me?"

Grant looked over the coat. "You really think it's this coat that's doing this somehow?"

Delia nodded, then tugged at it to demonstrate how she couldn't take it off. "No matter how hard I try, I can't take it off, or get rid of it. And trust me…I've tried."

She told him about trying to leave it back at the House of De Vil, and how it was back home when she returned. Then throwing it in the trash, only to find it back on her bed waiting for her. How she always woke up with it covering her and now couldn't take it off.

How it kept getting *heavier* and *tighter*, like it was literally strangling her.

"Ugh, I wish I'd listened to you," she said mournfully. "About Harper and social media. And that I'd never heard of House of De Vil."

Grant made a strange face. “What did you say?”

“House of De Vil,” Delia repeated. “It’s the big fashion brand.”

Grant bolted up and grabbed a pen and paper. “How do you spell it?”

Delia gave him a strange look, but then jotted the name of the brand onto the pad. Grant took it from her and circled “De Vil.” Then he wrote something else underneath it:

D-E-V-I-L

“OMG, you’re right,” Delia said. A chill ripped through her stiff body. How had she never realized that before? “It can’t be a coincidence, can it?”

Grant hopped up and logged onto his computer. He googled “House of De Vil” and pulled up articles on the fashion line. He clicked on the first one. The headline read:

HOUSE OF DE VIL DISAPPEARANCES

He scanned it, then looked at Delia. “It says here that back in the day, they had to discontinue a line of famed coats because it seemed as if everyone who purchased one mysteriously disappeared.”

Delia looked down at her coat.

“Dis…disappeared…?”

Grant was suddenly so pale he looked sick. “That’s what this article is saying.”

Delia shivered. She wanted to rip the coat from her body, but she knew it was useless. The coat clung to her tighter, as if sensing her intentions.

Grant continued reading. “‘Only ninety-five of the one hundred and one limited-edition coats were sold before the House of De Vil was forced to recall the remaining garments amidst accusations of foul play. Although no malice was ever proven, the remaining House of De Vil factories were shut down, seemingly for good. But then, a few years ago, the factories mysteriously opened back up and House of De Vil reappeared on the fashion scene as if it had never gone.’”

“It’s so weird. I feel like the brand has been around forever. I’ve been following their social media since…since I had social media,” Delia said.

Grant's eyes scanned the rest of the article. "This says nobody knows for sure who reopened the factories, or who's behind the new fashion line and stores," he told her, looking up from his computer and meeting her gaze. "Even the iconic Cruella De Vil might not be a real person. Nobody knows if she ever really existed."

"So it's all a mystery?" Delia asked, her throat going dry.

"Yup, a mystery that makes their famous black-and-white coats and fashion accessories even more coveted," he said with a frown. "It's kinda genius when you think about it."

"Or totally manipulative and creepy," Delia suggested.

Grant shrugged and hit a few keys on the keyboard. "Apparently, the coat you're wearing with the color block design is the famed Cruella Coat."

Delia would have rolled her eyes if she could have. Everyone knew about the Cruella Coat.

"It says they destroyed the unsold coats, but the designer herself is always pictured wearing one," Grant said after scanning the rest of the article. "But only from the back. Nobody's ever seen her face or knows what she looks like." He pointed to a picture of Cruella De Vil from the back wearing the coat. "So weird."

It was the same as the one in House of De Vil's profile picture on PicPerfect. Delia looked down at the coat. "So you're saying this coat… might've belonged to her?"

"Yes, it's possible," Grant said. "If she ever really existed. Who knows?"

"None of this explains why this is happening to me, though," Delia said desperately, focusing to get the words past her plastic lips. "If this coat is cursed and slowly turning me into a…you know what…then what am I gonna do?"

Grant frowned. "I don't know yet, but I'm going to do more research. There must be a way to make it stop. I won't let this happen to you."

Delia couldn't explain it, but she believed him. She clung to that hope, even as her body grew stiffer and her face refused to smile. She glanced at the picture of Cruella De Vil with her half-black, half-white head of spiky hair and her faux-fur coat, then met Grant's determined eyes.

His friendship made all the scary things she was facing feel somehow *less* scary. It was better medicine than even hot chocolate or jazz, and that was saying a lot.

“We’re going to fix it,” Grant promised. “If it’s the last thing I do.”
“Together,” Delia said.

16 DOGNAPPING

When Delia arrived home on stiff legs, a locksmith was tinkering with the front door. The window next to it was smashed, and glass was sprinkled all over the doorstep and *Welcome Home* mat like confetti. She scanned the wreckage.

"What happened?" Delia asked, her lips barely moving.

"Oh, thank heavens, you're safe!" Mrs. Smith exclaimed the moment she saw Delia. She wrapped her up in a shaky hug.

At least her landlady still recognized her. Delia was just starting to feel relieved by that when she noticed the muddy boot prints marring the doorstep.

Delia gasped. It was just like in her nightmare—the one where the puppies were missing. And just like Fashion Addict's warning. When her friend had vanished along with the coat, the only thing the police found was…muddy boot prints.

"Did…did someone break in?" Delia stammered.

Mrs. Smith released her from the hug. She was a blubbering mess, wringing her hands. “When I told them…I wouldn’t sell the puppies…they kept on calling and calling…but I didn’t think…they’d actually *steal* them….”

“Wait…what do you mean?” Delia said with a start. She rushed inside as fast as her plastic-y limbs would allow, feeling her heart thumping. “Is Radar okay?”

In the kitchen, her eyes fell on the pen. It was empty. The puppies were gone. Someone really had stolen them.

“No,” Delia wailed. She backed away from the pen in horror.

“Oh yes, it’s terrible…just awful,” Mrs. Smith said, coming up behind her. “I called the police, but they won’t do anything about it because they’re not…human.”

“Well, they’re human to me,” Delia said, wanting to cry, but her plastic eyes refused.

“My dear, I know,” Mrs. Smith said. “They are to me, too. But I’m afraid no one will help us.”

“Who do you think did it?” Delia asked, feeling cold from the inside out.

Her eyes darted to the smashed window. It felt so violating that someone had broken into their house and stolen their puppies. The kitchen was also ransacked and the muddy boot prints were everywhere, splashed across the floor and carpet, leading up to the puppy’s empty pen.

“Well, the Rescue says there have been a series of dognappings all over the state, focused on Dalmatian puppies,” Mrs. Smith said. “But they don’t know who’s behind it.”

“But who would do such a thing?” Delia said, pulse thrumming. “Stealing puppies? That’s beyond terrible.”

“*Monsters*, that’s who,” Mrs. Smith said tearfully. Her face hardened, and her upper lip stiffened. She broke down in sobs next to the empty pen. The house sounded so quiet without the puppies. It felt empty, terribly empty.

“Yes, monsters,” Delia repeated, rubbing Mrs. Smith’s back. She wished she could cry. She felt like an emotionless doll. It was horrible.

She looked down at the coat. At the faux fur. And remembered the day she had noticed that the faux fur was as soft as the puppies’ fur.

Her heart lurched.

Cruella De Vil.

Not a monster, Delia thought. *A devil.*

Was it possible that Cruella De Vil was sending her some kind of message?

But she had to be long dead, if she had ever existed. Too many things didn't add up.

Ping.

The sound of Delia's phone alert startled her. While Mrs. Smith returned to deal with the locksmith and the window repairman, Delia walked as fast as she could to her bedroom.

With trembling hands, she unlocked her phone. A new DM popped up in her PicPerfect account. It was from *the Devil Woman.*

Those filthy mongrels belong to me!

Delia stared at the message in horror. Her heart plummeted through her chest. She wrote back, her hands so stiff that it was hard to type. It seemed that the curse kept getting worse the longer she wore the coat, especially now that she could no longer even take it off.

Why would you steal them?
Who are you?
Please, you have to give them back!

The response came through instantaneously. *Ping.* Text bubbles popped up from the Devil Woman. *Ping.* The terrible words cascaded over the screen.

Why would I give you back what you claim is yours?
Why, when you've stolen what is mine?

Suddenly a cackle echoed out of her phone, even though that was impossible. Then images of plastic mannequins wearing the Cruella Coat flooded the screen. The mannequins stared at Delia with their plastic, frozen eyes and dead smiles, draped in faux-fur coats.

Delia dropped her phone, but it kept loading more mannequin pictures. They swirled around the screen, glaring at her with frozen eyes and blank,

expressionless faces.

Then another sound echoed out of the phone, one that made Delia's blood run cold.

Yip! Yip! Yip!

It was the sound of the puppies barking. And not just any puppies—it was *their* puppies. She could feel it. Then a dark silhouette appeared on the screen—a woman with spiky hair wearing a fur coat.

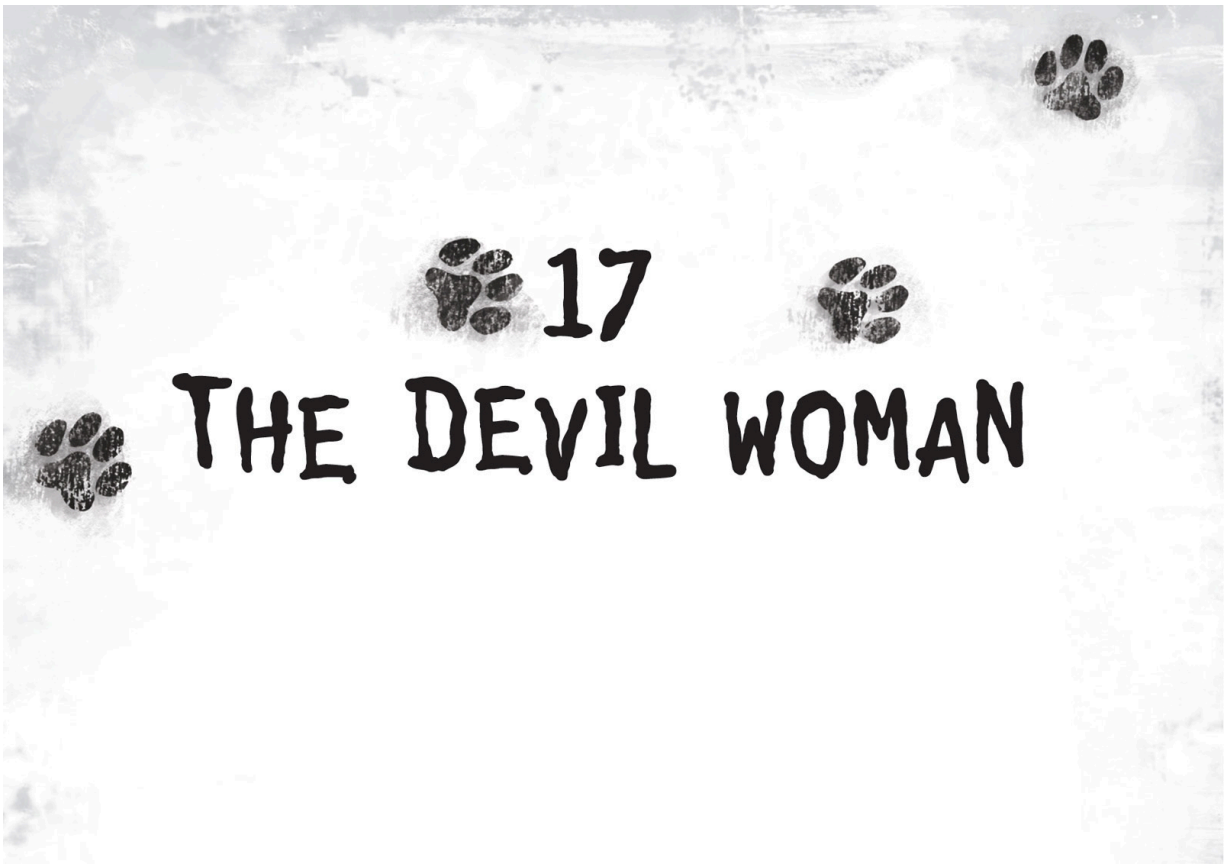
You have one chance to save them!
Bring my coat in exchange for the puppies.
You have 24 hours.

Delia tried to type back, but then an error message flashed across the screen:

Profile Deleted.

The messages wouldn't go through. The account had vanished.

The Devil Woman was gone.



17 THE DEVIL WOMAN

Sleep that night was impossible.

For one thing, Delia kept expecting her phone to come alive again with cackles and puppies crying. And for another thing, she couldn't take the coat off anymore, no matter how hard she tried. She had to sleep with it strangling her body. She also kept thinking about the break-in and the muddy boot prints on the doorstep. And worst of all…

The puppies. Where were they? Were they scared? Was this Cruella person—or Cruella imposter—being mean to them? And how *could* it be Cruella? If Cruella had existed, she would have to have been dead by now. Which would mean…

No.

She could barely even think it.

But it would mean she was being haunted by Cruella De Vil's ghost.

But ghosts didn't exist. They *didn't*.

Delia glanced down at the coat. A few days ago, she would've thought cursed coats that could transform a person into a plastic mannequin didn't exist either.

At this point, anything was possible.

Delia didn't sleep at all. She kept listening for another break-in, even though Mrs. Smith had the locks changed and the window fixed, along with steel bars placed over it to protect their town house. It just didn't feel safe anymore. Not even with her mom and Mrs. Smith asleep downstairs.

The sight of the empty pen and the messages from the Devil Woman haunted her all night. She had to figure out a way to rescue the puppies.

And fast.

* * *

When Delia arrived at school, hobbling on her stiff limbs, she found Grant right away by his locker. He took one look at her and his jaw dropped.

"Oh no, it's getting worse," he said.

"I know. I feel like I don't have much time," she said, trying to be brave.

She had noticed it right away that morning—the curse was getting stronger. Not only could she barely bend her arms and legs, but she looked almost nothing like herself when she looked in the mirror.

"What does that mean?" Grant looked completely spooked. "You're not __"

He stopped talking as Harper and her friends waltzed past in their House of De Vil boots. Harper glanced at Delia—then her gaze passed right over her, as if she didn't even recognize Delia anymore. But for the first time, Delia didn't even care. She knew they weren't her real friends, and she had much more important things to deal with.

She turned back to Grant and blurted out the whole story about the puppies and the messages from the Devil Woman on PicPerfect.

"Wait, you think they stole your puppies?" Grant said in shock. "House of De Vil?"

"Yes, exactly," Delia said. "Maybe. I don't know! There's a lot I still can't explain. If Cruella was even real, then she'd be long dead. But House of De Vil *is* real and making new clothes, so somebody is behind it.

Somebody wanted me to find the coat. *Somebody* stole the puppies. *Somebody* sent me all those horrible messages. It's all connected."

"You think it's…Cruella? Like, her ghost or something?"

Delia bit her lip. "Look, I don't know. But the messages said I had twenty-four hours to bring the coat back to get the puppies. But I don't know where! The account was deleted."

Grant ran his hands over his hair and held it back from his face. "I can't believe they'd actually steal your puppies."

All around them students rushed to get to class, calling out to each other, laughing, sharing thoughts on the homework. These snippets of normal life all seemed so foreign now. Even Aaliyah and Zoe. Even her PicPerfect ranking. None of it mattered. Delia was turning into a mannequin, and their precious foster puppies had been stolen.

All because of her.

Delia wanted to cry. She wanted to scream and freak out. She pressed her fingertips into her cheeks, feeling how stiff they had become. Even her lips struggled to form words now.

Her face felt so…plastic.

"Well, I've been doing some research. Remember that article about the limited-edition coats?" Grant said. "And the people who disappeared?"

"Yes, of course," Delia said, forcing the words out through her stiff lips. They came out a little muffled.

"Listen," Grant said, glancing around. He pulled her aside and lowered his voice. "After you went home, I did some digging. It took some time, but I found House of De Vil's original address. It's an abandoned factory on the outskirts of town."

"An abandoned factory?" Delia said, feeling a stab of hope. "Maybe that's where she took the puppies?"

"Right," he agreed. "What if we go there and give her back the coat? Maybe she'll stop haunting you and reverse the curse. And give the puppies back."

"Do you really think it'll work?" Delia said hopefully, though she couldn't smile or raise her eyebrows at the thought. She wanted to show emotion again. Feel her expression change. She was desperate for it.

"Well, I admit it's a long shot," Grant said, meeting her gaze. He reached out and squeezed her stiff hand. "But what other choice do we have? We have to try."

That was when it hit Delia. She was dragging him into this all over again.

"No. *I* have to try," she said. "I'm the one they're after. It could be dangerous. They broke into our house and stole our puppies. Who knows what else they could do?"

Grant shook his head. "No way; I'm not letting you do this by yourself."

Delia met his eyes, forcing her gaze to turn even though it was hard. "I should've listened to you…about all of it…. I was so wrong…."

"Delia, it's not your fault," Grant said forcefully. "She's the Devil Woman. This shouldn't be happening to you. It should never happen to anyone! Look, I know we don't have much time left. The message said twenty-four hours. When do you want to go to the factory? We can take the train out there."

"After school?" she said, feeling the urgency like a kick to her stomach. "You're right. Also, I don't have much time left. My symptoms are getting worse all the time."

She held up her hands for him to see how plastic they had become. Her fingers were stiff and no longer bent fully.

"Yes, after school," he agreed. "We can meet outside and take the train to the factory. The end of the line stops not far from where it is."

Delia tried to smile. Her lips fought her, but she forced out the barest hint of one.

She was so thankful that she wasn't in this alone. She thought about all her PicPerfect friends. Or *so-called* friends. Even Aaliyah and Zoe, but especially Harper and the Glam Posse. The ones who professed to adore her, then sent her devil icons and abandoned her as soon as she wasn't trending in the rankings anymore.

She was grateful for a *real* friend.

She met Grant's eyes. He held her gaze. "Don't worry, we're gonna fix this and get your puppies back," he said, and in some deep way, she knew he meant it. "Delia, I promise."

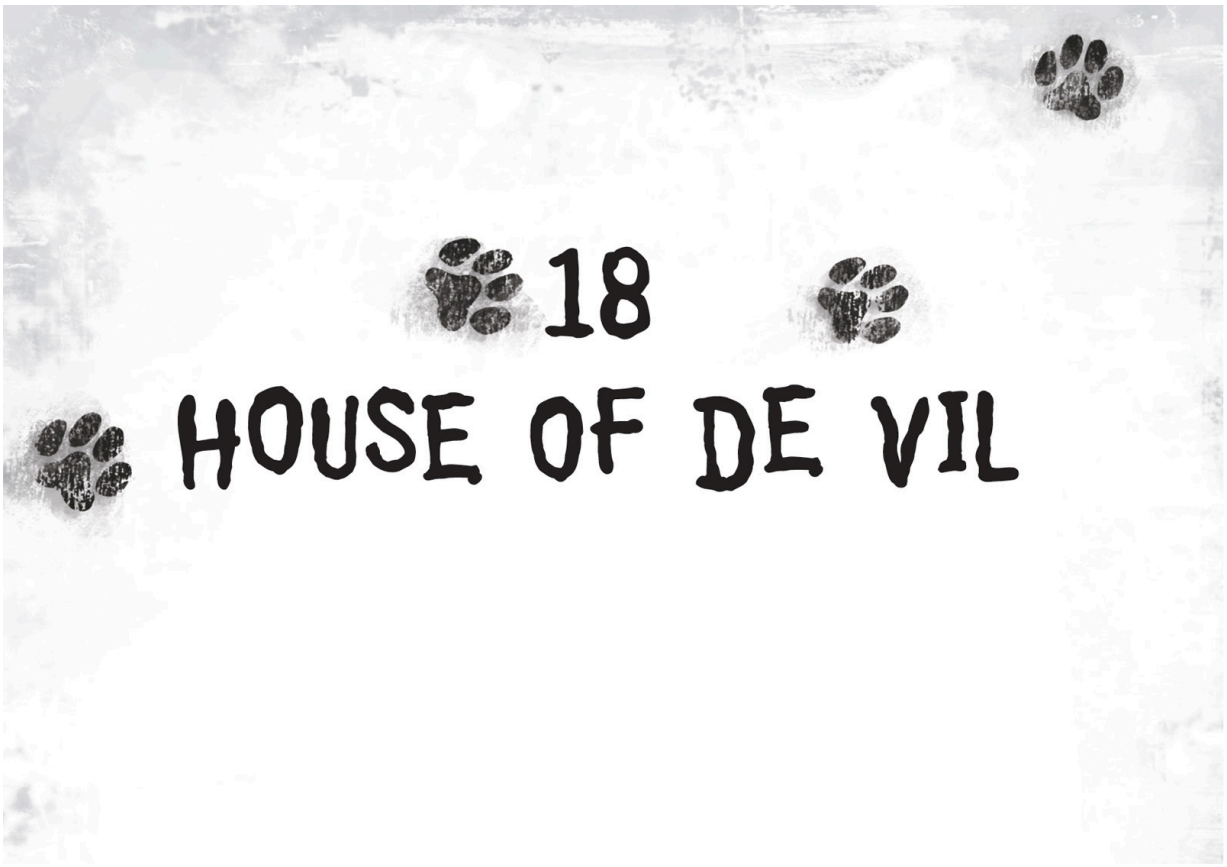
He was her real friend. And that meant everything.

* * *

Getting through the rest of school was a nightmare. The curse seemed to be worsening with every passing moment. The coat felt heavier and tighter than ever. Delia didn't want to look like a plastic doll—she wanted to be herself. She was sorry she ever wanted to look different or change her appearance. She'd made a huge mistake. And she wasn't the only one paying for it now. She couldn't stop thinking about the puppies and how alone and scared they must be.

One thought shot through her head as the final bell rang and she hurried outside with Grant to catch the train. She didn't know what awaited them at the factory, but she knew this:

Radar, I'm gonna save you if it's the last thing I do.



Delia and Grant took the train to the outskirts of the city, the buildings growing more dilapidated and run-down with each mile as they entered an area filled with old factories.

The passengers around them thinned out, each getting off at their stops, until they were the last ones left on the train. Finally it slowed with a squeal of the brakes. “Last stop,” the conductor announced over the speakers.

“Last stop…House of De Vil,” Grant said, clutching Delia’s hand tighter. Their eyes met. She felt a shiver. “It’s the end of the line.”

“I hope the puppies are here,” Delia said, guilt still churning in her gut. She clutched the soft coat tighter around her, even though it was what got her into this mess in the first place. If it wasn’t for the coat, the puppies would be home safe, and she’d be normal.

Not turning into some plastic doll.

Delia followed Grant off the train, hobbling down the stairs from the station.

“It’s getting worse, isn’t it?” he said, shooting her a concerned look as she stumbled on the steps. He caught her arm, steadying her.

Delia nodded, feeling her neck strain to move at her command. “My legs feel like they don’t wanna bend.”

“Then we don’t have much time left,” Grant said in an urgent voice. “Let’s hurry.”

“Easier said than done,” Delia responded, her legs fighting her. But she forced them to move and keep up with Grant.

A cold wind tore at them as they tramped away from the commuter station. The skies had turned slate gray. Delia could smell snow in the air. She could taste it on her tongue, cold and pure and crisp. It felt like a big winter storm was bearing down on the city.

Delia peered ahead, her eyes falling on an old, crumbling factory perched atop a hill. It was surrounded by an iron fence and looked completely abandoned. Even the fence drooped.

She gasped and grabbed Grant’s arm when she saw the golden crest emblazoned on the front gate.

“House of De Vil,” she whispered, recognizing the signature seal.

Grant set his jaw, his eyes fixed on the factory. Tall smokestacks jutted out of the concrete building. It was a large, sprawling facility, but collapsing and dilapidated. This was where they’d manufactured the original House of De Vil line before they shut down.

It was eerily silent and deserted.

“It’s a little late to say this now,” Grant said in a low voice. “But I have a bad feeling.”

“Me too,” Delia said.

The factory was abandoned—not a soul in sight. She’d expected that. But it also felt so ominous, so eerie—as if the empty, broken windows were staring down at her.

It felt…haunted.

Delia took a deep breath. “Look, we don’t have a choice. We have to save those puppies. Or, well…*I* do.”

“Wait, what do you mean?” he said, skidding to a halt.

“I mean you can still back out,” Delia said, feeling a rush of fear sweep through her stiff body. “It’s not too late. This isn’t your fault. It’s my fault. I don’t have a choice—I have to do this. Plus, if I don’t…I’m gonna turn plastic. But I’d hate to put you in danger….”

“Stop it,” Grant said, shaking his head vehemently. “You’re my friend. This is what friends do—they help each other when they’re in trouble. They don’t run away because it gets hard.”

Delia’s heart lurched. Why did she never understand that before? Why did she want to be popular with strangers online who turned on her the second she wasn’t perfect enough anymore? Harper and Charlotte and Ella had dropped her the second things turned even slightly *weird,* let alone hard. Even Aaliyah and Zoe seemed to have completely forgotten her.

If she’d just understood what real friendship was, then she wouldn’t be in this mess. But she couldn’t change what happened. All she could do was try to make things better now.

Grant helped Delia climb up the hill toward the front gate. It towered over them. He reached out and touched it….

Creak.

It swung open by itself.

“Uh, yeah. That’s not creepy at all,” Grant said, meeting her eyes. “Totally normal.”

“Right, it’s almost like…” Delia started, but then he finished her thought.

“They’re waiting for us,” he said, meeting her eyes. “Whoever *they* are.”

Snow started falling from the sky, while the wind picked up. “Hurry, let’s get inside before it gets worse,” he said, pulling her through the gate and toward the factory. The front door gaped open, lopsided on its hinges.

If the outside looked bad, the interior was even worse. Dim light swirled with dust. Industrial tables stacked with sewing machines and other hulking equipment, like huge vats for dyeing and manufacturing clothes, filled the cavernous space. But everything was shut down and covered with a thick layer of dust. It looked like it hadn’t been in operation for a very long time. So who was making the House of De Vil clothes now? And where?

“Radar…can you hear me?” Delia called, her voice coming out raspy and stilted through her plastic lips. “Here, boy…Are you here?”

Silence.

Delia braced herself and tried a new tack. “Hey, Devil Woman! Look! I brought your coat back! Just like you asked!”

The factory was silent.

The sun was starting to set, casting the interior into shadow.

She tried again. “Radar…come on, boy…bark for me!”

But still…nothing.

Delia swallowed hard. She glanced at Grant, who looked crestfallen. She had gotten her hopes up that the puppies would be here and they’d find them. That there was still a chance to save them from the terrible, evil dognappers.

“I’m so sorry—” Grant started, but then Delia shushed him. She heard something. It was faint…but could it be?

Yip, yip, yip.

“Radar, boy!” Delia called out, her raspy voice echoing through the factory and reverberating back. “Come on, bark for me! I know you can hear me!”

Her voice echoed and died out. But her ears must have been playing tricks on her. She turned to Grant. “It was a good try, but let’s go home—”

Then, suddenly, she heard it again. For sure this time.

Yip! Yip! Yip!

“That’s Radar!” Delia exclaimed.

She’d know his bark anywhere. It was unique—higher pitched because of his small size, but defiant and strong. He was the runt of the litter, not even supposed to survive. But he had. He was a fighter. She grabbed Grant’s hand and hobbled on stiff legs toward the barking.

They burst into a back room, and Delia gasped at what she saw. This was the design workshop for House of De Vil—sketches for the original line were pinned to the walls. Even the famous Cruella Coat with the color block pattern. The design sketches sent a chill down her spine.

But then she noticed something even worse. There were pictures—black-and-white printouts curling at the edges—of women wearing the Cruella Coat. At first glance, nothing was odd about them. But Delia noticed that each was stamped with a red date and the word “Disappeared.”

“Oh my…She kept track!” Delia exclaimed.

Grant followed her gaze and approached the wall of photographs, touching a few of them, running his hands over the dates.

“She kept track of the women who bought the coat and disappeared. And when.” Delia felt sick to her stomach.

“I can’t believe this,” Grant said quietly, still studying the photos. “She was a monster.”

“A devil,” Delia corrected.

Yip! Yip! Yip!

Delia startled, and then hope cascaded through her. There was still a chance to rescue the puppies. They rushed from the design room as fast as Delia could go, and moved toward the barking. All around them now were huge conveyor belts, mountains of moldering fabric, and giant sewing machines. Grant was about to shove open another door when a new sound reverberated through the factory.

It was so loud that it shook the floor.

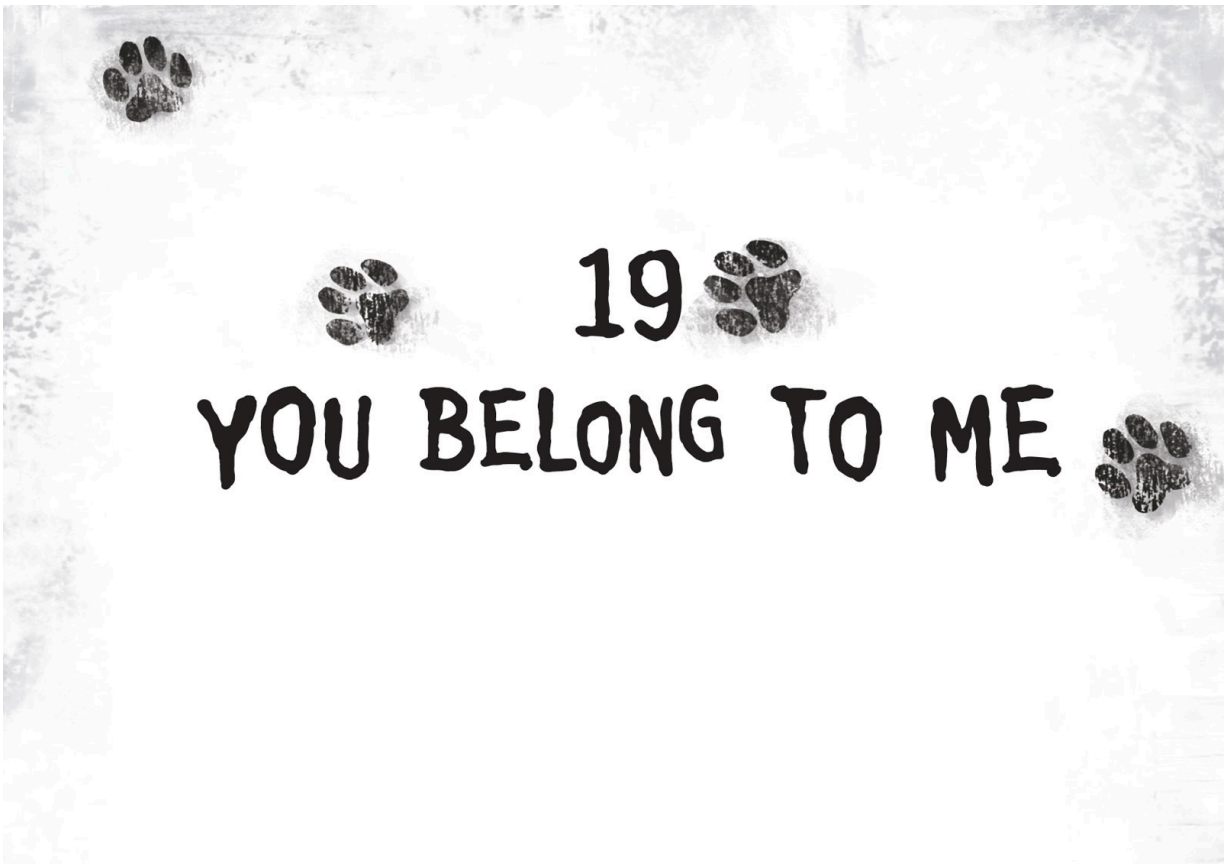
Clank. Clank. Clank.

All the machines started up out of nowhere.

"But how…? Who's doing this?" Delia rasped. "The factory's deserted."

A cruel laugh cut through the air. Delia and Grant locked eyes, then slowly turned as one. Right in front of them, a huge shadow rose up from the ground, towering over them. Its hair was spiked and its skinny fingers were like claws.

"Darling, you're here! And you brought my coat."



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YOU BELONG TO ME

The shadow vanished as fast as it had appeared.

"Here…you can have your stupid coat back!" Delia said, struggling to wriggle out of it, but it still constricted her body like a tourniquet. It made no sense. If the Devil Woman wanted it back, then why was the coat still sticking to her? She scanned the dark factory for another glimpse. "I don't even want it anymore. Just give the puppies back! They don't belong to you—"

"As my coat does not belong to you!" the voice screeched from the shadows. "Take it off now!"

But no matter how hard Delia tried, the coat wouldn't release her. She started to feel desperate. "I'm trying…but it won't come off. I swear!"

"Stupid girl!" the voice cackled. "Then I shall take my coat off your plastic, stiff body myself!"

Suddenly the machines grew louder and began moving faster. They churned and whirred, filling the factory with awful industrial noise.

“No, please!” Delia yelled to be heard over the machines. “You have to let the puppies go! I don’t even want the stupid, ugly coat.”

Everything stopped. The machines, the noise. Everything. Delia’s heart caught. She looked at Grant, his breath coming shallow, making clouds in the cold air.

“What is happening?” Delia whimpered.

Then she felt a coldness slip across her shoulders, followed by an even colder breath in her ear.

“How dare you call my coat ugly?” the voice whispered. It was *right* next to her. “You’re such a vain little girl. So vain you had to steal my couture. And now you’ve fallen right into my little trap.”

The machines clanged to life again. Grant grabbed Delia’s hand.

“Run!”

Delia tried. She tried to keep up as Grant dragged her forward, feeling the voice—the ghost—whatever it was—behind her the entire time. The cackling grew louder and closer and closer and louder. But then— *Yip! Yip! Yip!*

Radar was still barking for them. Delia and Grant burst into another room and staggered to a halt. The puppies!

Radar saw them and scrambled to the edge of the pen where the puppies were being kept, jumping manically. His distinctive bark rang out.

Yip! Yip! Yip!

“Yes! Let’s get them and get out of here!” Grant cried. They ran toward the pen, but Grant tripped over a wire and fell, twisting his ankle. He tried to stand, but his leg buckled. He couldn’t run.

Delia looked around in desperation. Cruella was coming for them.

“Leave me,” Grant gasped from the floor. “Just save the puppies—”

“No way, I won’t leave you,” Delia said, helping him up despite her stiff body. “We’re friends, remember? We don’t leave each other at the first sign of trouble.”

Suddenly the doors burst open and Cruella’s sha-dow loomed. “Stay away from them! Those mongrels are mine!”

The shadow stretched across the room, filling the cavernous space. Little Radar and the puppies snarled and barked.

“I will have the puppies *and* I will have my coat!” the voice screeched.

But Delia had a plan. She motioned Grant toward the pen, then turned to confront the Devil Woman. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Grant

crawling toward the puppies in their pen.

"What do you want with my puppies?" Delia rasped at Cruella's ghost. She could feel her body turning more plastic, but she didn't care anymore. She only cared about one thing. She had to save Radar and the other puppies—even if it was the last thing she did.

The room filled with an evil cackle. "Get rid of them. Get rid of all of them," Cruella said. "And I will, unless you hand over my coat."

"Look, I already told you," Delia said, still struggling with the coat. Her body felt stiffer and more plastic than ever. "I don't want it anymore. I don't care how fashionable or popular it made me. I just want to be me again. Like…the *real* me. Your fashion line is cursed!"

"It's too late for you, darling," the voice drawled. "You and your puppies all belong to me."

Delia gulped. "What…what do you mean I belong to you?"

But before the voice could answer, the puppies swarmed Delia's ankles.

Grant had released them from their pen while Delia was distracting Cruella. They stampeded through the factory, heading for the exit.

"Noooooooo!" Suddenly the shadow coalesced again into the size of a woman and lunged for Grant. "They're my puppies! You can't have them!"

Pandemonium broke out. The puppies leaped at the front doors, barking and growling. Grant hobbled after them on his twisted ankle, pushing the doors open to release them from the factory. His eyes flashed back to Delia, who could feel herself transforming even more quickly now. Her body stiffened completely; she couldn't walk anymore. She could barely move.

"Just promise…you'll save them…" she croaked. "It's too late for me…. I know that it's too late…. I made too many mistakes…. Just save them!"

She tried to turn toward him, but it was no use. Her joints locked into place, stiffening as they turned fully plastic. Grant took one last look at her, clearly torn about what to do. But then Radar bit at his ankles, trying to herd him outside.

"I'll get help!" Grant shouted. "I'll come back for you!"

Then he turned to lead the puppies to safety. But Delia knew it was too late for her. The Devil Woman was right. Delia belonged to her now.

The last thing she remembered seeing before her eyes froze completely into place was the shadow towering over her, fingers curled overhead like claws.

“You’re going to pay for this!”

The House of De Vil flagship store was busier than ever, packed with high-end shoppers flashing their credit cards and leaving with fancy tote bags stuffed with boots, coats, and other accessories. It was spring fashion season, coming on the heels of the worst winter in Chicago's history.

The Glam Posse from Delia's school browsed the aisles, pulling items and holding them up for inspection.

"OMG, look! The Cruella Coat!" Harper shrieked, rushing over to the special display case in the center of the store. Inside, a mannequin posed in the iconic black-and-white coat.

Harper modeled in front of the display, snapping selfies for PicPerfect. She moved her face, choosing the perfect angles, positioning her arm to snap them.

Click. Click. Click.

She tagged them #CruellaCoat and hit POST. Her account still trended at the top.

"Ugh, I *wish* I could get my hands on that coat," Harper sighed enviously, taking in the mannequin with her arm on her hip. "But there's only one. And it's not for sale."

"Hey, remember that girl who had the coat?" Charlotte asked.

Harper sneered. "Not really…. Who knows? I bet it wasn't even the *real* thing. It was probably a knockoff like her boots. She was a scholarship kid, remember?"

"Whatever happened to her?" Ella asked, studying the mannequin. "She kind of disappeared. Just stopped coming to school one day."

"Bet she went back to public school," Harper said. "Where she belongs. I bet we never see her again."

The girls all snickered, then moved on from the display as Harper's phone chimed from all the hearts piling up on her PicPerfect post about the Cruella Coat.

Maybe they wouldn't see Delia again, but she could see them. As they traipsed toward the counter with their chosen items and their parents' credit cards, she watched. Delia would always be watching, trapped in the display case, wearing the Cruella Coat.

Forever.

THE END

Dah-lings, I hope you enjoyed the nightmares!

Penning these *unhappily-ever-after* endings is my favorite part. Can't wait to hear what you think of this one. Don't worry, I've got something especially wicked cooked up for book five. You won't want to miss it. As I type this, I'm in the middle of the draft.

I can't believe I'm already writing the gratitude section for the fourth book in my Disney Chills series. For a long time, these books were just spooky little stories that I had in my head. Getting to write these characters is a dream come true. Or maybe…a nightmare (ha).

I have to thank my amazing team at Disney Books, including my fabulous editor, Kieran Viola, my design team, and my publicity team for working to get the word out to readers, even in this roller coaster of a year. Also, thanks to my book agent, Deborah Schneider, and the rest of my rep team at ICM, Gersh, Archetype, and Curtis Brown. Disney Chills and my other books and writing take a whole dream team, and I am grateful for your efforts on my behalf.

I also want to thank everyone behind the classic Disney film, which is one of my all-time favorites, and pay special homage to Dodie Smith, who wrote the original book, *The Hundred and One Dalmatians*, and cowrote the script of the film. Cruella De Vil truly is one of the greatest villains ever. Adding to her story is extra special. I'm so thankful I got the chance to tackle her—and bring her to life with as much wit, cunning, charm, and style as she deserves. *Dah-ling, you're simply fabulous!*

Finally, extra-huge thanks to my readers for embracing this new series. The enthusiastic response to the first book has kept me inspired and writing, even during one of the hardest years in recent memory, maybe in my lifetime. Dear sweet readers, you're the reason I do this. And don't stress—we've got more villains coming soon for you!

Can't wait for you to find out what's next for Disney Chills.

Happy nightmares!

—Jennifer Brody (aka Vera Strange)

JENNIFER BRODY (writing as VERA STRANGE) is a graduate of Harvard University and a creative writing instructor. She began her career working in Hollywood on many films, including *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Golden Compass*. She lives and writes in Los Angeles, where she's hard at work on her next book. You can find her on Twitter @JenniferBrody, and Instagram and Facebook @JenniferBrodyWriter.